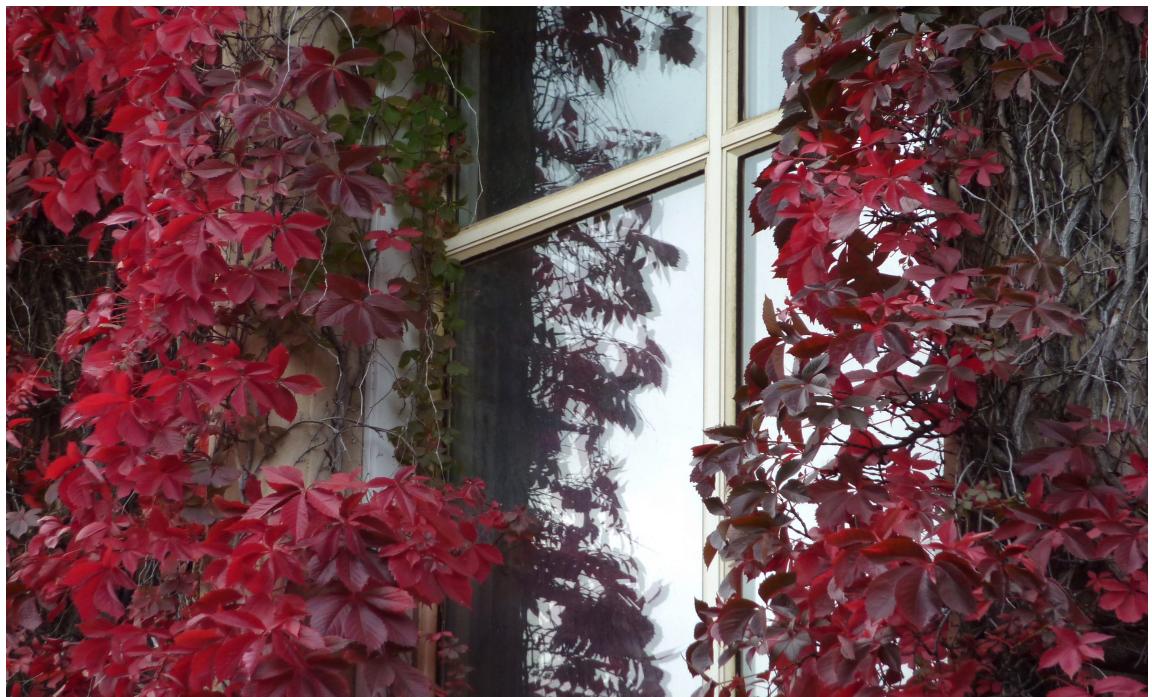


Lesley Battler | Journal | 1990



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Journal archive project

Introduction

As a young reader i was fascinated by diaries, journals, notebooks of all kinds. Perhaps part of that attraction was that they seemed a way of telling your own story, remaking the world as you went on. “They” never have the final say in your journal.

I grew up in a family that was shattered by mental illness and writing in a journal was a discipline and a way of keeping myself together; proof I could build an independent life. I was never big on recording my most intimate feelings or expressing myself. For me, the journal existed to help me let go and move beyond the emotional, interior world. I was so much more interested in recording the flora and fauna of the mundane. Daily life was exotic to me.

From the 1980s and on into the Naughts, I wrote in a journal, which I eventually transcribed into electronic format as a project to keep me occupied during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. At first it felt like a self-indulgent pastime, certainly a little irrelevant considering world-events, but as I continued I started feeling maybe there was some value to the project. I decided to preserve them as archives, format them as PDFs and release them onto the Internet where anyone can search, download and use any of the material for projects of their own.

To me, this journal is really an archive, portrait of an era as seen by one insignificant person. It’s the insignificance that is truly key here. I love the archives and records of the invisible lives that accumulate into social zeitgeists. Being a journal, it’s hit-and-miss what I wrote about, or had time to write about. Huge chunks of my life never made it to the page while there may be hundreds of words devoted to a movie I enjoyed on a hot summer night. I have not added any narrative arc or changed names to keep the journal as intact as possible.

In such a long time span the journal volumes reveal a generation trying to find their way in the world; me and so many of my friends and acquaintances working contract jobs, going to community colleges to learn vocational skills. Spoiler alert: societal change, turbulence, employment issues, generational conflict were just as strong then as they are now. While transcribing the journals I also became fascinated by the rhythm of daily life, how periods of calm so often erupt into times of intense change.

I have taken the original journals and reformatted them into chronological years that begin in January and end in December, and I have included a synopsis with each one to provide a little context. I preserved as much as possible the style and quirks of the original handwritten journals and only employed some light editing to correct place names, and obvious mis-spellings.

These volumes are meant for anyone who is interested in the 1980s and 1990s, in archives, in the lives of young people trying to find a place in the world, in personal impressions of socio-economic-cultural events. This, of course, includes the introduction of the Internet to our daily lives. Please feel free to browse, reuse, recycle any of this material for your own projects. After all this time I still believe information wants to be free.

Vol. 10, 1990

An exclusive haunted house – “Montréal, just try to find it” – McGill University film collection – Maya Deren – God, medicine and the other Osler – Laurie Anderson (and her outer space violin) – Gail Scott, Erin Mouré reading – Power failure in the Métro – From the Blue Angel to the symphony – The Captain’s Table – An orthodox Jewish salon – To the Netherlands – A medieval house in Eefde – Zeeland, Utrecht, Amsterdam – Dunkirk, Rouen, Paris, Strasbourg – A scene straight out of Simenon in Wolfisheim – No order at the astronomical clock – “Fahr’n fahr’n fahr’n auf der Autobahn” – German-Czech border crossing – Beauty of Prague – The Little Fortress of Terezín – Return to the Netherlands – An ambiguous war story.

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Jan. 3

Mystery revealed! There is a boarded-up building on Bleury near la Gauchetière, which has piqued my curiosity ever since I first came upon it. Wooden hippos on the roof, a carnival zoo, a little diagonal sign on the door that said, “la maison hantée.” I have discovered it’s a hot nightclub that has been packed to capacity since opening two years ago, all without advertising and got in with some of my Concordia pals. It’s like my old basement spookhouses, which shows that you could revive anything from childhood, add a touch of sophistication, keep it exclusive and charge admission. Just like the Aunt Marjorie Chamber.

I am greeted at the door by a dour Dracula and grope my way through a dark maze replete with papier-mâché masks and monsters. Scowling waiters appear. (This made me think of something Cynthia said at work the other day. *The Wall Street Journal* often contains surprisingly interesting and off-beat reports. Cynthia saw a line drawing on the first page and said, “Ooh, Vlad the Impaler. He’s always been one of my favourites.”)

Without warning, a nearby table levitates two metres off the ground. A pitcher of water spills. Houselights dim. Sparks emanate from the stage. A funeral dirge blasts through the sound system. A procession of ghouls enters the room with dinner. The head ghoul is either Merlin or the Grim Reaper. Can’t quite tell which. The Grim Merlin is followed by Caligula, a couple of old crones, a hooded executioner, a powdered ponce, a cross between Mozart and a preppie. One of the crones, la Baronne, is a waitress. She informs us that she is doomed to an eternity in hell just for poisoning her family. (Cynthia would love this; she could play this role to perfection.) On stage a couple of ghouls try to shove an unsuspecting guest into a coffin. Another ghoul performs card tricks at our tables.

A tiny pony-tailed ghoul follows me around, whispers in my ear, occasionally shines a flashlight in my eyes. He even follows me to the bathroom where he turns out the lights and tries to lock me in. All I'm missing is the sound of my own voice cackling on the tape recorder hidden in the furnace room. This really must be some sort of karma for all those spookhouses I created back then. This is a theatre of the absurd and a comedy fest rolled into one.

Besides ghouls, there are tarantulas, South American dancers, jugglers from Ontario, rappers from Chez Nous and Italian soap opera. "At Home with the Borgias. More than 40 performers are involved in this. Very much like the ghost shows and phantasmagorias from the 19th Century where people gathered in theatres and were frightened and amazed by table-turning and ancestors appearing from walls.

Jan. 8

Interesting talk with JonArno about poetry. He's the gentle shelver who works with me on Monday night. He's a poet, although he claims to have written only three good poems. We talked about Charles Olson, Creeley, Ginsberg, Erin Mouré, bp nichol and the Four Horsemen. We have also talked about various readings and workshops. All this came about because it is so slow at night I started reading Zukofsky's life-work, *A*, while on the desk. We wrapped the conversation up by agreeing the only solution was marrying someone rich, and maybe working at the management library is a good start for us.

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Interesting evening in the Norris building, waiting for my 8:30 class to begin. Wandered upstairs to the English students' office for a cup of cheap coffee. There wasn't any but a man with an accent told me to make some and thrust the coffee pot into my hand. It didn't occur to me to protest or ask who he was so I took the pot and fumbled around so hopelessly he finally came and did it all for me. I've never seen him at Concordia as a student, and in fact I may have seen him hanging around the McGill Student Union. Kept feeling I was the victim of a prank and my reactions were being recorded.

Downstairs in the cafeteria a man came in and monologued at me about lateral thinking for about half an hour. His basic point was that medical researchers haven't found solutions for any of the incurable diseases because their minds aren't trained to look at areas beyond their own specialty. They should be mixing and combining ingredients from all places. Ingredients seemed to be a favourite word. He was off-centre but interesting. I agreed with him and he bade me good night.

I was wearing my Names Project (AIDs quilt) t-shirt. A student asked me about it and I told how I had seen the quilt and paid tribute to Dan Alchuk. Finally time for class. A good thing because I was completely drained by all these encounters. I bet it was the shirt that attracted them.

I think this will be a good class. Only five of us and we seem pretty much on the same level. No one is condescending or arrogant. I like Janet Madsen's positive energy. Patricia Stone tries to do everything right and asked a lot of questions about term papers. I met Lucy Ng at Patty's party and really like her. I didn't expect to see Robin Massey this year but she's in the class as well, much more congenial this time. Like me she's been around for a while and keeps dropping classes due to circumstances. Terry Byrnes more relaxed and accessible. He doesn't have any fans or wannabes this time and is outnumbered. Discussion about the novel: ideology expressed through plot, language differences between short stores and novels, form as a non-neutral element and how Flaubert submerged the narrator into language. I found this especially interesting.

Jan. 12

Met Mary Rose after work at Charles Darwin's, a mellow place to talk and have a drink. She told me about her visit out west and how the reality didn't quite live up to her fantasies. She was upset because she was more or less ignored at the family gathering. They acted as if she had dropped in from twenty miles away, as if she had only been away for two weeks. It's been twelve years since she's seen most of them, except her mother. She had to go outside and cry for awhile.

Mary Rose thrives on intense talks and the only person she really had a chance to speak to was her younger sister Joan. MR is closest to Joan and one of her younger brothers. Her sister Miriam hates her because of something she did when they were children. Mary Rose loves her mother and they are very close. Her mother is the centre of the family and I think MR has always tried too hard to live up to that strong archetypal mother image.

She still has a very difficult relationship with her father. He won't talk about anything that happened in the past. Her mother left the family when MR was a teenager, to be with another man. That caused MR so much pain it froze her and she says it's as if she is only just starting to come out of a deep sleep. MR's mother and father reunited but only under his condition that nothing was ever said about the incident. MR said she can't get through to her father who uses money as a form of reward and punishment. He offered to pay for her braces and sent her some money. While she was visiting, one of the few things he said to her was that he wouldn't be sending any more money. MR already has the braces on so now she is stuck with the expense.

She had forgotten how much space there is out west, the horizontal land and big, big sky and talked about how she could get in touch with nature again. Here in the city she feels claustrophobic. The geography you grow up with is so important! But then she waxed lyrical about the way they dress out west, how wonderful it was to dress like "normal people." She gave me a present, a harlequin mask very similar to the type Val liked so much. Val often wore a pin on her coat depicting the face of a sad harlequin. I started wondering if I would ever run into Val again in Ottawa, Toronto or Montréal. Would we speak to each other? Would we both look the other way? I did think Mary Rose's gift of a harlequin mask was so interesting. A symbol for her as it was for Val.

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Hilarious back-page item from *Montréal Magazine*, reminiscent of Italo Calvino or Georges Perec. A New York public relations firm makes Montréal so exclusive tourists will fight to spend time here. The plan is to transform the city into an exclusive private island. New civic pride slogan: "Montréal – Just Try to Find It."

– The name “Montréal” will be obliterated from all maps. The city will disappear from atlases, school maps, CAA guides, everywhere cartologists roam. The idea is to change Montréal from fact into rumour.

– All entry points to the island, bridges, airports, docks, will be blocked off with red velvet ropes while former nightclub bouncers will be hired as “ropeside immigration officers.” Card-holding Montréal residents are considered “regulars” and are allowed immediate island access.

– Visitors will find it hard to leave the island. They’ll be given an exit pass if and only if they sign a notarized document swearing secrecy about their visit. Thus, when friends and neighbours say, “You’ve been to Montréal. What was it like?,” the only permissible response will be, “I really can’t talk about it.” I would love to run with this concept. Of course adding how the highway over the bridge leads to Verdun rather than Centre-Ville!

**

Finally saw Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. Multi-faceted. So many questions; questions posed by the movie and my own questions. The movie itself was like Godard crossed with *Grease*; heat, light, colour and physical movement. Set on a block in the heart of Brooklyn on the hottest Saturday of the summer. Intense oranges and reds melting into each other like volcanic lava. The movie opens with Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power.” Inventive camera work, low angles, crowded panoramic frames where everyone interacts with everyone else and the contact is relentless, oppressive. Characters peer over each other’s shoulders and everyone has a voice. Even the walls have voices: “Tawana Told the Truth.” Spike Lee works like a sketch artist. The cameos alone are worth the price of admission. Pizza stands, Korean grocery, storefront radio station, brownstones teeming with life, hot, humid and enclosed.

Taunted by a moving chorus of high school kids, Radio Raheem stalks the neighbourhood with his enormous boombox. The stammerer peddles portraits of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Racial, collective pain erupts into violence at the end. The photos of Malcolm X and MLK serve as the movie’s central duality. Do you choose one over the other?

Has the movie itself made this choice through the violent ending? Is this doing the right thing, or not doing the right thing? Call to violence or a cautionary tale? There is nothing heroic in the burning of Sal's place, especially since Sal is portrayed with subtlety and complexity. He is not a power figure; he is part of the street, neither hero nor villain.

**

One of the best things about working at McGill is having access to the ICC collection. Took out Kenneth Anger's *Magick Lantern Cycle Vol 2: Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, 1966. Dream, ritual, temple, pyramid, statue: formal arrangement to beauty, art and the numinous. Interesting how you can pick up a sense of time, even in a film that is timeless. Colour and lighting the same as those old 1960s educational films about nature or geography. A head-and-shoulders close-up of one of the women revealed her as looking exactly like any woman who could have appeared on a magazine cover at the time. Not so much because of the hair and makeup, but because of the gold light and dense tint.

I guess in movies and photography the technical process is inextricable – time and place are revealed outside of the performance itself. Colourful hypnotic dances, movement according to inner dream, archetype. This acting out something beyond individual expression was the unity of the film. Everyone had a tightly scripted role to play and the film lasted until everyone completed their movement. A film like this is every bit as rigorously directed and controlled, if not more so, than any film with conventional characters and dialogue.

Collage of images from the Orient. Generic oriental fabrics, textures, background. It seemed as if all the images I've ever seen (*Life* magazine, *Holiday*, etc) of priests, acolytes, Buddhas are made transparent and blend into each other. Almost like taking those 1960s films of places like Indonesia, Java, Japan, Bali and breaking up the linear, informative flow, taking images and symbols, extracting and distilling them from their specific times and places and turning them into something separate and new.

Propitiation of the gods through ritual, elaborately decorated objets d'art, dancing, music. Evil confronted by masks, contorted faces carved into masks, painted in angry colours. Necessary part of the ritual. Objects given and received as sacraments. Figures drink alchemical powder from a huge goblet.

Collective fantasy; everyone has chosen to participate. No one individual dominates. Everyone is part of the whole, a facet, a face focused on for a second in the process of transforming and fading into another face. This is the film which includes Anaïs Nin and her friends. I found it thrilling to see her enter the room, her head in a golden cage, an ecstatic dreaming face. I've seen the still photo so many times and now I get to see it in motion as part of a choreographed whole; a world of symbols and art.

Also able to see some of Maya Deren's work. First, *Meshes of an Afternoon*, 1943. Stillness of an afternoon, deep contrast of light and shadow. Small afternoon movements fraught with peril. The ominous significance of seemingly everyday objects; a phone receiver off its cradle, a flower lying on a woman's path, a knife lying on the stairs. A woman in a back chador carries a flower – no face under the hood, only a blinding white face-shaped mirror. Resemblance to Buñuel.

At Land. A silent study of fluidity. A woman (Deren herself) lies on the beach. Waves roll in, cover her, roll back again. Ebb flow ebb flow. She lies as if drowned, only her eyes are open. Deren's films are highly choreographed. I loved the juxtaposition of the woman climbing with scenes of the woman crawling across a table, inching her way past people who are eating, drinking, smoking, talking superficially. They do not notice the woman, or if they do, her presence does not make any impression on them. Party scene. Anaïs Nin again. A dance of shadows. No sensual connection between any of the party-goers; ghostly figures who are erased on the screen as soon as they appear. My favourite scene is where Deren is submerged into the sea and becomes a white negative of herself engulfed in blackness.

Celestial choreography of *The Very Eye of Night*. Transparent white troupe dancing in the blackness of space. Similarity between deep space and the sea in *At Land*. This was the least realistic and the most interesting of the films; illuminated figures dancing in a deep space studded with lights.

Jan. 25-29

Patty arrived on Friday. We met at the Health Sciences Library then went to Amelio's. Drank wine and had Italian sausage pizza. She talked about what's been happening lately with student newspapers. Across the country, student newspapers are being turfed out of their offices and dissociating from the student societies. It looks as if she is going to be sent to Lennoxville. The Bishop's paper is trying to achieve independence from the student council there.

Went to a Mary di Michèle poetry reading at the Hall Building. Talked with Lucy Ng, Patricia Stone and Janet Madsen from class. Good to see both Terry Byrnes and Scott Lawrence coming out to the readings. Mary Di Michèle was nervous and hesitant. Later we all went to the John Bull pub. We pulled three long wooden tables together. With the dim light and all the wood I kept imagining a gathering in the Great Hall, our beer mugs turning into tankards. Mary di Michèle arrived and sat in the middle of the group. People greeted her but didn't cluster around her like satellites. It was extremely refreshing.

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To La Calife, a lovely Lebanese restaurant with Patty, David McKnight and Lily. Then on to Station 10 to hear Ray Condo and the Hard Rock Goners. Energetic, sharp country-western music with a Jazz Butchers feel.

**

After her meeting at the Link office, Patty returned to our place. We ate lasagna and drank wine. I went into the bathroom to floss my teeth and Patty wandered in and joined me. I really liked that. It's been a long time since I have been in the bathroom with anyone (probably only ever with Boot) and this felt so intimate and natural. She said more about Lennoxville. The student council changed locks on the newspaper office, impeached the editor and seized the paper. The paper, called *The Campus*, is trying to become independent. Patty is going there to help them, tell them what their rights are, etc.

**

Patty left for Lennoxville. After she left the apartment felt empty. Overwhelmed by a sense of loss, a feeling that persisted after I went into work. Looked out the binding room window at all the people walking up and down Sherbrooke and saw someone who resembled Wendy Patrick, wearing a jaunty red beret. Wendy Patrick is no longer on earth. I'll never be able to look out this window and see her walking down the street. She was here and now she's not. With my father, I knew death was coming, he had been ill for a long time. But Wendy died suddenly from a brain aneurism.

Jan. 31

A Howard Ross lunch at la Poissonerie to celebrate the appointment of our new head, Bob Clarke, who was head of the vanishing MLIS library. Henie, a part-time reference librarian, dominated the conversation with detailed accounts of newly acquired possessions and gossip about librarians. As usual, Meredith continually slipped between talking to the younger library techs and joining the librarians. Age or career: which will win out at any given moment? I am completely sympathetic to this dilemma.

I really like Judy Symansky. She's a librarian with the Industrial Relations Centre but her desk is at Howard Ross and she divides her time between the centre and Howard Ross. She has a delightful sense of humour, an easy-going personality. I wish she were our permanent reference librarian instead of Jodie. You can tell Jodie has had her experience and training at McLennan because she has the over-inflated self-importance of the McLennan reference people. She toes the party line and spends much of her time with committees and meetings. I am pleased that she is no longer acting head as Bob Clarke seems much more congenial.

Feb. 9-11

Trip to Burlington, Vermont. Nascent spring weather reminding me of travelling through Europe with the choir. Lake Champlain veiled in heavy fog. Mile after mile of soaked fields. Factories appeared, the way they do in grainy sneak-photos taken in Eastern Europe; photos taken on the run by journalists gathering proof of pollution and devastation of the countryside. Reached Underhill Park. Tried to drive up to our camping spot on Mt Mansfield but got stuck and had to winch our way out. The first inch is the hardest. The car won't budge, then there is the first tremor when it finally creaks, thuds and moves, like a ship stuck in an iced-in harbour, Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler all out with their telescopes, star-gazing and calculating.

Wonderful night drive. Moon swam through streaming cloud-mountains. A tall tree loomed like a faceless Kafkaesque business man in a silvery suit, holding a briefcase. It changed back into a tree as we drove by and the metamorphosis was startling. Tree-covered hills, twinkly town lights. Detour into Jerusalem. Yes, the biblical names of towns seem to suit the geography of Vermont. By some trick of the moonlight, the town, or hamlet, was white as snow as if it had been constructed but never inhabited, sleeping in its valley, like a city of Zion.

Feb. 14

Dinner with Fred at Encore Une Fois. Ed Singer came in with a female friend. He didn't see Fred and me. It was odd. I was glad to see Ed out and about but I now have an inkling of what it feels like to see an ex-lover somewhere in the city. Ed was wearing his usual plaid jacket, sweater and jeans. Unencumbered by camera equipment. I don't think he was carrying anything except his leather bag. He leaned in close to his friend, gesturing in his universally intimate way. I wanted so much to eavesdrop. I heard his short ironic laugh. Thought of saying hello, I'm sure Eddie wouldn't have minded the interruption, but I wasn't so sure about his companion – or Fred. I compromised by leaving a hello message on Eddie's machine.

Feb. 15

Cake at Howard Ross for Meredith's last day. She's been talking about moving to Ottawa but isn't sure when or even if she will go. I will miss her. She's the one closest to me in age and we have a lot in common beyond both of us trying to find a foothold in the career world. She knows how important and difficult it is to make solid lasting friendships in the city. She knows exactly how I feel when someone (like Patty) moves. She sat on the couch, poised and bright-eyed like a precocious little girl but then said, "I want to stay here forever and ever."

Day was almost spoiled when Jane went into a huff. It was my turn on the desk but she sent me to the lounge for fifteen minutes to join the party for Meredith. She had been picking on me all morning over petty things, so I returned to take the desk in exactly fifteen minutes. Jane looked surprised and said I could stay longer.

I wanted to get my shift over with and then enjoy the cake. I thought saying that would offend her so I made the most innocuous remark I could think of, which was I'd get indigestion if I ate my cake too fast. I thought that would be a rational, impersonal response that in no way implied anything about her. Ha – you fool, you fool! She reared up just like a skittish horse and said, "Well someone has to take the desk. It just can't be helped." I restrained myself from saying, "Why do you think I'm here?" She is a delicate instrument, an intricate psychology, so many moving parts to her. She probably felt guilty about having to make me take the desk – or maybe she thought I was trying to make her feel bad about that. Anyway, with Jane the outburst comes and goes. Later she came out and very graciously collected and shelved all the books that had come in, her way of making amends. We had a pleasant conversation about Europe. When she turns forty she wants to treat herself to a trip to Europe, France in particular. She'd like to learn French in Paris. She has the same sort of romantic dreams about Paris as I do.

Ed Singer called me at work. We met at Villa Maria metro and had dinner at Amazona, a Greek restaurant in NDG. He prides himself on knowing the names of waiters and waitresses. He looked healthy and fit, not as pale and gaunt as in October. He kept wondering why it had taken four months to get in touch with each other. He also said he felt nervous talking to me at work. He says he never feels any sense of a boundary line or limitation when he's with me.

He has resumed working on his novel about Ellen and we covered well-worn territory about writing and criticism. How literary we must have sounded! What a pair of typical grad students! He really does sling a lot of critical terminology. I like it when he wears his clear glasses and I can see his eyes. He talked about the woman he was with at Encore un fois. Again, I was struck by his scornful tone, his sarcasm when talking about a woman. He has so many female friends he sees in exactly the same way he sees me. I wonder what he says to Robin Massey about me. He flirts, his voice becomes breathless and intimate. He holds out promise of a deeper relationship but it never happens. He said he thought this woman was falling in love with him and wanted more. I remember him saying exactly the same thing about Robin last year. I can only assume he says the same thing about me. His signals are so mixed it's easy to understand the confusion.

Another one of his “sturm-und-drang” stories. The Encore woman spent the night with him (and he explicitly pointed out to me it wasn’t sexual) and they had a terrible fight. He told her she was troubled, then back-tracked by saying everyone was troubled in some way. Does he attract troubled people into his life or is that just how he perceives people – women? One thing for sure, he is definitely not a reliable narrator. I wonder if Ed has read a lot of Saul Bellow. The interest in psychoanalysis, the articulate self-analysis, the questioning, the theory, the literary second-knowledge, the irony, his emotional vastness and his relationships with women are like any one of Saul Bellow’s characters.

After dinner we went for a walk through Westmount Park. The park was buried in snow. Snow-lit sky turning everything into a dream. We slid around on a snow-covered rink. I felt comfortable, uninhibited, chatting away about Ruth, Patty, Graham, the grad classes. Saw a gorgeous silvery tree. So delicate, outlined in snow, branches forming beautiful patterns against the moth-coloured sky with the snow dancing in the sky. Ed and I talked about dreams. I mentioned the dream I had just before my father died, and he was very astute. We parted company at Villa Maria. He told me he likes my energy. I’ve had some wonderful times with this man, I don’t know when (if) I’ll see him again and it doesn’t bother me.

Feb. 16

Went to see two free one-act plays at the Chameleon Theatre with Mary Rose and Morrie. The first play was *The Frog Prince*, with Michael Carley playing the prince. Same sort of ironic, self-mocking role as in *Imaginary Invalid*. He even turned into the same sort of nice boy at the end. The dialogue was written by David Mamet but could have been written by Michael himself with the ironic flip comments, quips, laconic asides and easy-going mockery. The lighting formed a lacy mandala and there was a lovely use of cloth, netting and wire to form fairytale trees.

At intermission MR and I went for a walk in the snow and she dropped a bombshell. No wonder she had been so edgy all night! She has been seeing, and having sex with another one of her son Eli's friends, a "beautiful black guy" named Shawn Allison. Morrie knows she is seeing another man and they have agreed they should split up.

Morrie has always idealized Mary Rose, never quite seen her as a flesh and blood woman with sexual desire. The biggest problem is that MR has to keep Shawn's identity a secret from both Eli and Morrie. This adds a real forbidden taboo quality – also all the drama MR could crave. She wants to move out and have her own place by spring. I told her I was out with Eddie last night and we embraced for a long time, rocking in each other's arms, snow covering our heads and shoulders. The second play was adapted from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and we were both too distracted to pay much attention to it – except for the scene where the female character went down on the male character. MR was so aroused she grabbed my hand. Then I could feel the old familiar one-two-open-close-clench-throb and we sat through the scene holding hands.

Feb. 18

MR called from Shawn's place. She spent the night with him. He lives with his father, who not only knows about his son's affair with an older woman but seems proud of his son's prowess. MR said she had to go and cry over his close relationship with his father, compared to her geographical distance and lack of closeness with her own family – except her mother and sister. MR's mother sent letters to everyone in the family asking their forgiveness for what she did to them in the past (leaving the family for another man).

MR was surprised when Shawn came after her and wanted her to tell him what was wrong. Then Shawn picked up the phone to talk to me and MR is right, he has a warm, sexy voice. She advised me not to use whipped cream because it dries too fast and it's difficult to clean!

Feb. 26

Letter from Marsha. Her father has gastric cancer and it doesn't look good. He has lost fifty pounds and it sounds very similar to both Sharon's and my experiences with our fathers' cancers. Marsha is in the stage of frantic visits and ceaseless worry. I can always hear her voice when I read one of her letters as if she is in the room with me. I heard her voice while reading these words:

“I can't imagine what the next few months will be like ... John and I were just sobbing little animals last night. I understand again what it feels like to have a full heart. It seems so hard to face the idea of saying goodbye to him. Only now can I start to comprehend what you went through, and are still going through ...”

“... I must start to do some work at work. I miss you guys and so does Gus. We are all hitting the big time in life, one by one, aren't we?”

Feb. 27

Saw *Monsieur Hire* at the Rialto. Based on a Simenon novel. It captured the atmosphere and sense of inexorable destiny of a Simenon novel. The movie developed beautifully, the tragic dream existing inside the solitary figure. The movie, also like the novels, really depicted the closed community of bourgeois Parisians, a world of habit and routine that shuns outsiders. Best of all, the movie retained Simenon's moral ambivalence. I could feel compassion for every character; the poor little isolated man whose only happiness had been the young woman who betrayed him, the young woman who betrayed him because she loved another man, even the great all-seeing police investigator running the wrong man to the ground simply because he was different, anti-social, didn't fit into the community. The investigator thought he was in pursuit of the right man and was doing his job – and his duty. Heartbreaking.

March 4

Fred and I went to Gail and Ravil's for dinner and videos. Gail appeared in an old smock and headscarf and I was happy she felt comfortable enough not to dress up for us. She told me she feels nervous when she has people over and feels pressured to clean the apartment and cook a perfect meal. We've had some good talks about life not turning out the way you expect it to and how to adjust.

She has been feeling bad lately because if she had stayed with her first husband, Greg the cop, the mortgage on their house in California would have been paid for by now. She's really had to adjust to living in an apartment over her parents' apartment with her three sons. The apartment reflects both what she grew up with, collected and expected to expand and changes she's been through. Dark bookcases are stacked right to the ceiling, containing her crustal and her Christmas decorations. I saw their famous liquor cabinet. Like us, they buy all these fancy liqueurs in the US and never get around to drinking them. We laugh over the weird cache of stuff we bring back across the border. Gail and her beans, me and my sanitary pads, sunflower seeds and books. I admired Gail's books and she was so happy someone appreciated them, she took me by the hand to show them off.

Ravil reminds me of Ya'acov, both in physical appearance and also in the fast-paced jokes he and Fred make. They play off each other so competitively there's no room for an outsider who doesn't know the lingo. Yet I also know through Gail that he is actually quite shy. He is certainly generous and gracious. He also has a romantic streak. He wanted to get married in Vienna, where Gail's grandfather served as a security guard at an opera house. He went so far as to inquire about doing it at the Austrian consulate. The consulate officials were utterly baffled as to why anyone would want to do this.

We watched taped episodes of *Fortunes of War*, based on Olivia Manning's memoirs. The series is engrossing. It unfolds slowly and takes us to places we haven't heard much about in connection with WWII: Bucharest, Athens, Cairo. In this series, place and story are integrated. You really get a sense of being in these particular places, rather than just watching a few scenes flash on screen as scene-openers.

March 14

Fred and I went to hear Faith Wallis's talk, "the Other Osler." The talk centered on the diverse and fascinating subjects covered by the Osler collection of the history of medicine.

-Medicine as philosophy of the body. "Physica" referred to the cosmos. Relation of heavenly spheres to human body. Medical astrology derived from this concept.

-Health and its social context.

-Witchcraft debate between physicians and clergymen. To physicians, witchcraft was insanity, melancholia, delusion. To the clergy, witchcraft proved the existence of pacts made with the devil. "Two groups of mandarins dividing up the condition of the human soul."

-Geology and its alchemical connection.

-Botany as the basis of pharmacopeia.

-Medicine and art: Renaissance depictions of human body. Anatomists pioneered study of proportions. Anatomical figures were posed in front of backgrounds. All they lacked was skin.

-Phrenology as index of character and also prognosis of disease. Face as a semiotically diagnostic tool and as classification of personality. Formation of brain inside skull created bumps. This was popular science!

-Gastronomy: diet, herbal medicines. On-going debate between homeopathy and established medical treatment.

-Horses and horsemanship! Close link between human and veterinary medicine. Early anatomical work done on horses.

-Law and medicine.

-Monsters and monstrosities. What constituted the unnatural and how did it occur?

-Occult philosophy (especially 17th century). Using new knowledge to gain power over the natural world. Pharmacy: operation of natural substances on the body. James Graham's electrical bed promoting fertility.

-Dress reform, e.g., not wearing corsets, advantage of sandals, etc.

-Technical illustration. Resemblance between anatomical and technical illustration.

-Xylography: wood-blocking. History of books and printing.

-Tyson's orangutan made link between chimpanzee and human anatomy.

The talk made me realize I really don't want to get an MLIS. As long as Faith talked about the books and their contents I was interested, but as soon as the librarians started asking her questions relating to the field (such as budgets, staffing, etc) I completely lost interest. I wonder if Faith herself ever feels a conflict between her scholarly work and her library management obligations. In some ways librarianship seems antithetical to scholarship and knowledge. As a tech I have so much more access to the books and information.

March 18

Patty in town this weekend attending a conference. She was billeted with someone from *the Link* so I didn't get to see her until today. We met at the CCA, which I still think is a strange, sterile building. Everything so new and calculated it gives me an eerie feeling. The structure reveals all its hinges, bolts, fasteners of every description. A model's precision, you could almost expect to see a complete set of instructions for construction of this museum. Even the angle of light and view from every window was geometrically calculated. Idea of creating harmony between all levels of a structure, from the exterior down to every window and floorboard.

No major exhibitions and very few people. Echoing footsteps and subdued lighting. It could be a medieval castle renovated by a rationalist, as if the architect had removed all the ghosts and shadows, the crumbling stone, the hidden staircases. Long dim passageways remain and the turret has become a model of cleanliness. Yet somehow not all the old associations from the past have been banished. I still get a sense of melancholy, of being in an old twilit building on a gloomy day.

Looked out one window and saw the park they've recreated at the crest of the hill. Norman Spatz doesn't like the strange little buildings suspended in mid-air because they clutter the skyline. I love them though, these toy temples, facades, fragments of buildings perched on the edges of cranelike pedestals, suspended in the sky over the City Below the Hill. Very surreal, and what I love most about the museum.

Patty, with her red hair and red sweater, broke up the subdued surfaces and planes, the tasteful greys, greens and browns with her colour, her vividness. She was upset over her thesis. After telling her for months everything was fine, Rob Allen now wants her to restructure it. She has been including parts of her father's letters and pieces of documentation she has sent for. She is also including the letters of bureaucratic run-around she has received from Victoria and Ottawa. Rob wants her to include less of this, and more poetry in the first section. He also wants her to use a different typeface to distinguish various voices in her narrative poems. I couldn't disagree more. The use of archival material adds so many layers to the poems. As for the different typefaces, I think all the voices should be juxtaposed – it's poetry, it should move and thrum with different voices and rhythms. I won't ever ask Rob Allen to be my advisor.

Patty and I examined the galleries. She is interested in architecture and knows a lot more about the subject than I do. She know a lot about many subjects. She was noticing all the new ugly buildings around town, including the new McGill bookstore. We spent a long time browsing in the CCA bookstore, then to the Faubourg for bagels. She ogled all the sexy clothes in the store windows. She has a collection of sexy black outfits yet is very private about her own sex life. I never heard whatever became of the pilot after the fight at her farewell party. She's joked a few times about marrying a logger in BC, at least I think she's being ironic. I accompanied her to the train station, once again watching someone descend, slowly disappearing into the underworld.

March 20

Met Mary Rose after work. I haven't seen her for a while and we've chilled our relationship. When we do meet like this after work, she doesn't look relaxed or comfortable any more. Shawn is still in her life but she says she's not in love with him. She and Morrie might be able to work out a friendship arrangement. They now sleep in separate rooms. She recently annoyed me by sending me a chain letter with both hers and Carolyn Springer's names on it. I was expecting a real letter, but all it was was the photocopied chain letter with "Go for it – take a chance" scrawled on a post-it note.

Carolyn has become an extremist, putting all her energy into selling algae and health diets. MR said her speech has become almost unbearably slow and deliberate. I couldn't help noticing how barren her apartment looked the last time I saw it. She had removed her family portraits, including the central one of her in an 1890s western costume. It seemed as if she is trying to erase all traces of her past self with the fervour and self-righteousness of a christian ascetic. What bothers me most, however, is how right-wing and sales-oriented she is becoming. I'm also wondering a lot about the relationship between self-discovery and right-wing views of life. Maybe too much focus on the self makes one selfish which logically leads to conservatism?

March 21

Seminar presentation on Gail Scott's *Heroine*. Ended up very different from how I started. My initial plan was to present a concise background to the feminist deconstructive theory which has influenced Scott and this book. I was going to explain how the book successfully followed this program. I enthusiastically scrawled notes on how conventional techniques of fiction are not necessary when autobiography, theory and fiction are closely fused. When I first read the book I thought it was brilliant, and that it fulfilled all her goals. However, when putting together the seminar I became much more critical.

When I first chose this book I thought I would have to spend a lot of time explaining and defending the novel because it is so different from the other books on the list. Instead, I discovered that it had its own agenda and was every bit as coercive as the other books we found coercive and programmed. I also know that although I will never be as fine a critic as Terry Byrnes, Abby or Ruth Taylor, I do read more attentively now. I think more critically and I have much more to contribute to the class.

This is such an extraordinary class. No one person monopolizes discussions or talks over everyone else. Lucy Ng, in particular, blends intelligence, intuition and grace in her comments. For once I don't feel outnumbered or marginalized. In fact, it has happened often that the five of us have concurred on our opinions on a book with Terry's being the only dissenting voice.

During my presentation I felt open enough to voice my thoughts, questions and concerns over *Heroine*:

-Role of the reader. Does the reader have to accept everything that is set out in a program that a novel like this sets up for itself? What happens to this work if the reader doesn't fully participate and accept Scott's assumptions as her own assumptions? What space does a reader have for her own interpretations when the novel itself analyzes and interprets its own content? Does the reader bring anything to this work, or does it even matter?

-Prose style. Although I loved the style of the novel, I found the prose was simply not the poetic, radical revolutionary women's language the reviewers all talked about. I couldn't find any evidence of "writing from the body" or any true presence of the subconscious.

Even the dreams are selected for their appropriateness to the theory. They are also undercut by sessions with the shrink and Scott's own critique of the shrink's analysis. If anything, the work seems anti-subconscious, super-rational.

-Self/other in the novel. My biggest problem with the novel turned out to be that I didn't think she had managed to achieve what she had set out to do. Instead of breaking the opposition of self/other, she intensified it. Many of the judgments pass on the others were middle class. So much of the book was filled with the same kind of stereotypical observation that many middle-class people seem to be born knowing how to make. Are Irish people supposed to have a particular type of cheekbone structure, eye colour? (Terry not only agreed with me but he was harsher about these judgements than I was.)

-Depiction of Marie. I was very concerned about Scott's depiction of Marie throughout the novel. Everything different about her was attributed to her being French! I don't understand how, after living and working in Montréal for the period of time (several years) covered in the book and in her milieu, Scott could possibly continue making that sort of distinction.

Terry was definite about his dislike of the novel. He thought the prose was sloppy and agreed with me in stronger terms about the way “others” are portrayed in the novel. He said he looked for the revolutionary, the reconstruction but couldn’t find any. The binary oppositions were held firmly in place. He praised my presentation, said it was good and I almost walked straight into the wall.

March 23

Cynthia’s birthday. I have become so fond of this feisty, talkative, tiny shelver/circ assistant who has become such an integral part of the library. Intelligence, acerbic wit, high drama and the ability to mount soapboxes with great flair. Interest in history, archeology, Richard III and all kinds of arcane subjects. My kind of person! Gail calls her the “Conquering Celt” or “the mouse who roars.”

In age I fall almost exactly between Cynthia and Gail and I feel myself shifting between the two poles: understanding life and people through experienced eyes and the excitement of jumping on a soapbox along with the twenty-two year old. I bought the most appropriate card I could fond and wrote “The Shelver’s Rap,” signing it “Kool Moe Lesley and the Kasual Kwire.” Jane saw the little rap and enjoyed it.

March 27

Lecture on god and medicine with Fred and Karen. It was sponsored by the Religious Studies department and the speaker had a christian theological perspective, which was shared by most of the audience. The first half was theological, very dry and bewildering. The three of us kept looking at each other and passing a tube of Sweetarts back and forth to keep awake. Karen and I both considered sneaking out. When the talk switched to medicine, it became interesting. The speaker became as witty and lively as we had hoped. His statement that the naming of diseases places them in a narrative caught my attention.

Some interesting ideas:

-Sickness as part of a life story, a biography and not as a totally isolated thing.
-God as bureaucrat, there to make suffering disappear and get the individual back as a functioning member of society.

-We have become incapable of reclaiming our deaths from medical care. Medieval preference was for lingering death to make atonement, to make our peace with god. Cancer was considered a good way to die. Now a quick sudden death is considered desirable. How to reclaim death so that doctors do not become murderers?

-Medicine as a reflection of people's fear of death. We cooperate with strangers with who fear of death is the only common aspect. How to maintain care in an ethos of cure?

-In North America there is no moral use for old people and so they become a special interest group trying to wrest money from other special interest groups who should also be integrated in society.

-We do not require our old people to be wise. In fact, they are required to be childish. We need to reclaim our old people and teach them the necessity for their stories in our society.

The only thing he said that I wish someone had questioned was his proposal that separate hospitals be set up for moral predispositions. He thinks the problem with society is that liberal pluralism has taken over. Yet he constantly compared North American attitudes toward death and the elderly with those of other cultures. Such comparisons wouldn't be possible without pluralism. How far does he take this rejection of pluralism? He wants to see separate christian hospitals where people know when they want to die and how to make their peace with god, not merely prolonging artificial life.

But what is exclusively christian about this desire? Anyone with a religious faith would want to die with dignity, at peace with their creator. Secondly, there are countless religious groups who keep their distance from the World. They already have their institutions and leaders. What is radically different about an exclusively christian hospital? And who pays for these exclusive places?

Also, why should the people with the strongest spiritual sense be separated from the people who really need them? When does separation become apartheid? And wouldn't this be doing exactly what he was criticizing about the segregation of the elderly from society? I personally think society needs way more integration, hybridity, diversity and plurality. Karen and I had a good discussion about the talk on the way to Amelio's.

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Discussed Ann Beattie's *Chilly Scenes of Winter* in class. I read this book a few years ago and disliked it for its bleakness, the "he said-she saids" and the constant references to brand names and song titles. I'm just not a big fan of realist fiction anyway. When I re-read it for this class I didn't like it much better but I did see some qualities I missed last time. Or maybe I saw them this time around because I'm older. The compression of the prose is skillfully done and I much prefer minimalism to overdone "powerballad" prose.

Mostly what I saw this time around was that the book reveals a line that has been crossed between generations. A sharp demarcation between the present and the past. There's this bewildering world the characters live in now, where everything is skewed and wrong, patched together with artificial textures of America. Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt are mentioned. Charles is only half-joking when he expresses shock over his sister never having heard of Amy Vanderbilt. There is also a childhood world of ruffled bedsheets, grandmothers, a good and bad way to behave. The characters, especially Charles, all have a real longing for this old world. His sister Susan, who watched Woodstock as a movie, does not remember the old world. She was born after the change took place and moves ahead in a straightforward way. Although I can't honestly say I like the book I think it does say something important about generations, age, nostalgia – and also about being an oldest child in a family, the one haunted by dim memories of a past where things were somehow different.

March 30

Laurie Anderson concert at the Spectrum: *Strange Angels* tour. Smoke, mirrors, giant screens, technological wizardry. Backdrop of one large screen, two proscenium columns of screens at stage left and right. A half wall of three horizontal screens across the stage framed Anderson and her instruments in luminous images. When you peer behind the curtain you see one ordinary person manipulating the controls.. You shift from amazement at the spectacle and magic to wondering how one person could create and maintain such an illusion.

Diverse audience. A lot of baby boomers; a man with a copy of *Whole Earth* on his table. Others looked “avant-garde” - very art school. *Strange Angels* contains her most accessible music but when I compare this audience to the one at the movie *Home of the Brave* just a few years ago at Cinema V, I was stunned by how completely she has been embraced by the mainstream. More singing and melody this time than recitation and rhythm.

Three microphones, voice changes, distortions. Anderson shifted between these microphones to get all the voices and sounds. Deep male voice projected, demented anchorman commenting on music and politics. “Hitler was a drummer, his rhythms made the people restless and they had to move – into Poland.”

– “The Germans invented Christmas trees. They saw a fir tree outside and said, We want this to be inside. They wanted to bring it on home.”

– “Mussolini was an opera star with his arpeggios. Ronald Reagan would speak quietly – with a lot of – pauses – and the more important it was – the quieter he spoke – and he always looked as if he was trying to recall something from the distant past.”

Anderson has a great comic timing, and a quick acerbic way of summing up the absurdities of daily life. After one dazzling display of film, slides and music she said, “I can’t believe this stuff is still working, so many things can go wrong, makes you wonder about military technology.”

– “Tonight’s performance is dedicated to Abbie Hoffman – the man who shouted Theatre! in a crowded fire.”

I loved seeing the light glint off her skeletal outer space violin. Repetitions, cadences of her speech could be chillingly incantatory. Instead of performing an encore she took curtain calls, bowing and collapsing like a spent Harlequin.

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Pleasant evening with Karen and Ken. I do enjoy Ken's sense of humour. He made a tape of various songs from the 1970s in response to a conversation we had had about the state of musical preference at Queen's, how Fred and I still hear the Eagles Greatest Hits whenever we walk down University Avenue. We played the tape, grimaced and laughed in recognition at all the old cheese. I made Ken laugh by describing the gothic horrors of my time at Vic Hall. I like Ken's wiry leanness, deep brown Sinead O'Connor eyes, intelligence and wit. But I like Karen just as much as I like him. I like her thoughtfulness, rationality and naturalness. I can't imagine anyone disliking her. She says she is the pragmatic one of the two. Ken is more intense, focused, definitely ambitious.

We talked about the differences between studying history and literature. He was once interested in creative writing and mentioned a workshop he had taken. As a TA he speaks with a lot of students, particularly women who write well but don't have the facts, the necessary research or the historical perspective. He tries to nudge these students into majoring in English. I don't know if his scornful, condescending attitude toward studying English reflects on his fraught relationship with his mother who was an English teacher. I also wonder about his singling out women in particular. He was speaking in a rather pedantic manner and I found myself hoping he doesn't turn into a dry academic, part of the old-boy's system.

But we had wine at dinner and Karen brought out her animal figurines and we arranged them all over the table, posed them on salt shaker podiums. Dinosaurs marched across the table. We had a great playful time. They are moving to Kingston. This is a big loss. Compatible couples who are the same age with the same tastes and interests are difficult to find in transient anglo Montréal.

April 6

Reading at Concordia: all-star lineup. Passed Abby Curkeet in the hall. She greeted me and I did not recognize her until she had passed. I sometimes have trouble sorting who I know from Concordia and who I recognize from McGill. She was very good to me in the prose fiction workshop so I tracked her down and we talked.

Gail Scott: Much more nervous than I expected. She read some new work in progress and her hands trembled as she held the pages. I expected the formidable political feminist and saw - Val. The way GS was clinging to her relationship with Jon was similar to Val and Al. I think Gails Scott could identify with Val's "dark Scottish moods" and the phrase sounds exactly like something that could have appeared in *Heroine*. I saw a strong connection which was strange considering that Val was the most conventionally romantic woman I have ever met.

Erin Mouré, who accompanied Scott to the reading, charged into the room with a rather ferocious expression on her face. I have see her a few times at the bus stop on Parc. I laughed, thinking of conversations I've had with JonArno on Monday nights. He said he liked her poetry a lot but thought she herself was "kind of scary."

Mary di Michèle: Also nervous and self-conscious. The way her forehead wrinkled in anxiety. She seemed apologetic about reading a "less serious poem." It seems you're supposed to be very serious to write poetry and humour isn't taken seriously – or even considered poetry. A line from one of her poems really struck me: "English language haunted by the ghosts of letters."

Gary Geddes: Just his physical presence, not to mention his loyal attendance at readings, his publishing ventures and involvement with students make it hard to resist looking up to him as patriarch of the program. His presence gives the feeling that this reading is a large family gathering.

Rob Allen: Also ubiquitous. The "cool" prof, always out at pub and readings with his coterie of students.

Jacqueline Kells: Read from a work in progress, “Her Addiction.” She is one of the undergrads in the poetry class, which was started by Irving Layton and finished by Mary di Michèle. Mary is the one who has received the affection and loyalty of the students. This Jacqueline Kells is highly touted. I wonder how much is because of the quality of her poetry and how much is due to her subjects, which are very au courant in American writing but not addressed much (if at all) at Concordia. Waitressing, strip club performing, heroin. Powerful material but too many fuzzy lines, too much unexciting, expected language. Some lines made me pay attention. I’d say there’s some great work there but that it needs editing. I hope that Rob Allen, or whoever it is who is backing her (because it’s obvious someone is behind her) realizes this and isn’t just beguiled by the sensationalist subject matter.

Lazar Lederhendler: Some interesting language play such as face-phase, she-shh. Maybe I’m just not attentive enough, but it seemed few of the poets were really using language, playing with individual words (word-world). Most of the poems were narratives based on personal experience. Not enough sharp vivid language, too much filler. Why use poetry as the form for this kind of work? Why not use prose, write a short story about the experience? To me, poetry should be all about language. I wonder if this return to the concrete, the personal experience is a larger trend or if it is the direction that Concordia instructors are leading the students? Is the conservatism here a result of “anglo bastion” syndrome? I so wish I could be in Vancouver hearing Kootenay School poets.

David McGimpsey: Outgoing guy, wears funny ties and a mood ring. Writes about pop culture, Elvis, Graceland, Babe Ruth. Finished his reading by singing “The Elvis Sea Food Medley.” Best performance by far.

David Solway: Ruth Taylor’s colleague. Cool, analytical, classical. I can imagine him in a discussion with Guy Davenport. Stream of clear crafted language. I so admire people who can do that. Chess poems. He punctuated his reading with interesting anecdotes. He sent his piece called “Chess” to Robert Weaver for the CBC anthology. Solway’s manuscript was returned one week later with a recommendation that he try *Chess* magazine. Ruth Taylor, who was in the audience with Nick, called out, “Not I, Rabbi,” in response to something Solway said about being misunderstood in class. He knows his poetic terminology, made clear distinctions between poetry and prose, exactly the sort of poet Ruth would admire.

After listening to Solway I understand better where Ruth is coming from, the desire she has for people to pay close attention to every word and the intelligence it takes to discover what her references mean. It requires a thorough knowledge of poetic forms and civilization. Most people aren't taught to do that. I certainly wasn't. How did people like Ruth and David Solway acquire their erudition? For me all the emphasis is placed on content, theme, the way the language and images build up, illuminate (and serve) the theme. I love the idea of seeing a poem as a palimpsest, a new structure built over an old one.

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Cruise in a snowstorm. Discovered the Île de la Visitation, a sanctuary close to our apartment. In the car, snow-covered windows, streetlights lustrous, starry. Passed through the garment district. A small house, and the Faith Pentecostal church wedged between factories and warehouses.

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“Black sheep’s destinies are not in necessarily having families / having prescribed existences like the American Dream / Black Sheep destinies are to give meaning in life – to be angels, to be conscience, to be nightmares, to be actors in dreams.”

-Karen Finley

April 12

Poetry reading at Bar Antigone – Mary di Michele’s class. Most of the people there were part of the class and I felt like an intruder. I was about to leave when in walked Lucie Adams and her friend Helen. I called them over, ordered Lucie to pull up a chair and we had our own party. Lucie and I cracked jokes about not belonging to a group or having followers.

Lucie is still working at the Montréal General and at the prison – the bin and the pen! I've missed her wry humour, expressive face, her sighs which always precede a switch in mood from funny and ribald to serious and sad. We indulged in jokes and conundrums about schizophrenics. How many seats should a multiple personality reserve on an airplane? If the host personality kills one of the other personalities is that considered a suicide or homicide? If a personality kills the host is that matricide? If someone turns into a male personality should she use the men's room? Helen looked alarmed. She was more withdrawn this time, not attempting to join in. I don't think she laughed once, which is too bad because her laugh is delightful. Lucie then swept her hair to the side and did a Terry Byrnes impression. He really is iconic.

The poetry was uneven as one would expect with a large group of students. I found the same narrow focus on narrative and personal experience as I did at the Concordia reading, the same humdrum language. Little imaginative work, no political issues (in Montréal!) or world events and very little experimentation with language. Again I found it difficult to understand why this was even poetry at all and not prose. Too much individual "slice of life" and way too safe.

Grant Loewen was there and came over to speak to me. He's around forty, grey hair, his face open and easy-going; the kind of face one naturally trusts. He recently completed his thesis and is looking for a publisher. No luck yet. His wife, Ann Loewen, works at Redpath Reserves and we talked about (what else) McGill. She officially complained about the air quality in the McLennan-Redpath complex, which spurred the Director's Office to action – action in this case being a study which was published in the McGill libraries gazette. I also found out that Gail's son Scott was housesitting for the Loewens. When they wandered off, Lucie and I joked about my follower, my fan club of one.

April 15

Time of the Gypsies. It begins with mud and men. Men gambling at a rickety card table in the mud with delicate washes of colour forming a background. Poverty and dream. Magic, music, superstition, power and terror of birth and death. But in spite of the mud, it is also about levitation, the ephemeral quality of what we do, use, or build to ground us, tie us to earth. From the cardboard houses to the pearly caverns to the stalactite cathedrals of Italy, they are illusory, dissolving in smokey reflections of light, turning to water – or they are actually lifted right off the ground. The house revolves in the sky during a storm at night. All the settings, kitchen, bed, all the human refuges are exposed to the world and drowned in one oceanic night.

Perhan is a teenager whose best friend is a turkey. He grows into manhood thinking he wants to marry Azra and live in a real house. This dream leads him into a life of crime and brutality. The camp is a dustbowl by the side of a famished highway and the children are beggar-slaves but he doesn't have quite enough awareness to turn his back and end the cycle. Revenge is what kills him. It's a story that has no ending for the patterns repeat forever. The children do not know why they are in hell but dream of being able to overcome the barriers of caste, isolation, exploitation and sickness. It is not a story of a particular time, place or ending but continues into infinity. Azra gives birth in the mud, the bridal veil streaking into the sky, turning into a prismatic comet. It is about the delicacy and dream of landscape in Italy, a promised land.

April 17

Last class held at Janet Madsen's apartment in NDG. Terry must have enjoyed our class because he brought a bottle of wine. He sat on the floor, comfortable and relaxed yet still keeping his distance from us. He talked about how he was born in the Kawarthas but lived everywhere in the US, never spending more than a year in one place. He has lived in Montréal for fourteen years and still can't believe it. He said he thinks Canada is much more socially democratic than the States and he found Americans very nationalistic.

He encountered nationalism, provincialism and an “every man for himself” attitude everywhere he lived. He also described the clannishness, devotion to the past and ancestry and agrarian roots in the southern states.

He used to work for the *Midnight Globe* as a fortune-telling columnist, Maria! He also wrote an astrology column for that paper but the astrology was too complex to be fun and he couldn’t make anything up because everything was checked by lawyers retained by the paper to ward off lawsuits.

He mentioned my book (said it was good!!) and everyone wanted to know about it. I tried to explain it was a fluke and Janet joked about my false modesty. Terry said it wasn’t false. He went on to say he is often solicited for short story and novel manuscripts. Bharati Mukherjee recently wrote, asking to see some of his writing. (Her husband, Clark Blaise, is a friend of Terry’s.)

It must be difficult for a good, well-respected writer to be not writing and we were all very curious about that. Terry claimed teaching takes all his time and prevents him from writing, but he is also too much a perfectionist, so busy rewriting he doesn’t write. He has begun several novels but can’t finish them because the sense of mission isn’t there. It’s amazing how gracious and attentive he remains toward his students. For a long time the university has cast him in this role of assistant, part-time professor, craftsman, technician of the program. He admits getting older has made him security conscious, much less able to live with the possibility of poverty. Just this year he became a permanent faculty member with his name actually on the office door “which I share with all and sundry.” It says “Terry Byrnes and the Creative Writing Faculty.”

We talked about Montréal. He said people born and raised in Montréal are by far the most intractable about politics. He also said the only places in the city which made him feel really uncomfortable are Pte-St-Charles where everyone sits on their balconies drinking beer from morning till night, and upper Westmount. I told the story of how I took the wrong Métro and went from Schettini’s Westmount apartment to Pte-St-Charles.

Pat Stone gave us all a ride to Atwater Metro. A merry ride with Pat and Terry in the front; Lucy, Robin and I in back. We talked some more about Terry's days as Maria the astrologer and I mentioned my ASM newsletter stint. He said the thing that disturbed him most was the number of people who believe in it unquestioningly. Robin is a Taurus. Lucy and Terry are both Cancers. Eventually Terry folded his tent and disappeared at the Métro. Lucy, Robin and I parted at Berri.

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Métro breakdown at Crémazie. We were kicked off the train. People flooding the escalators. I was borne along this force, intimidated and exhilarated. Lineups for every pay phone. Stood bewildered outside the station, not knowing what alternate route I could take. Long lines at every bus stop. Buses, cars, trucks whizzed by - breath-taking motion. I didn't know where to go, my only connection was with my workplace somewhere on the other end of a phone line. It felt like some great world-sweeping event had taken place, stopped the routine, stranding people in upheaval. A blind woman walked into me.

**

Notes for a story:

A power failure in the Métro took me back to the black and white newsreel '40s when trains travelled above ground and bore scarred wood panelling, heavy steel window latches, a luggage rack. People boarded at Windsor Station, a swirl of long coats, belts dangling from trenchcoats, high heels. You swung through the '40s in your Persian lamb like Joan Crawford in "Mildred Pierce." Drunk on rum, you drove the Ford too fast, careening down the backroads of Trois-Rivières while I screamed to be let out. "Only sissies scream like that." You scrawled notes for me on your way out to work at Sant-Maurice. "Thaw out the frozen peas, do the dishes, love Mother." But this little sissy fought for you when dad returned from the War. When he had you down, the time he broke your nose so that blood stained the Persian lamb so you could never wear it again, I threw myself at his back. I clung there, until he threw me off, smashing me against the wall, and in the Métro all I could see were soldiers, DPs, refugees, the name "Crémazie" at the end of the line.

April 24

Saw *Mystery Train* (Jim Jarmusch) at the Rialto. Structured as a triptych: *Mystery Train*, *A Ghost Story*, *Lost in Space*. Location of Memphis deliberately chosen. End-of-the-line America inhabited by people seeking a way out. People born and raised in this area juxtaposed with gracious, idealistic foreigners, a young Japanese couple, a woman from Rome. A former railway crossroad in decline, a legendary history (by US standards) as birthplace of rock & roll, Elvis Presley's resting place, home of Sun recording studio. Sun Studio still exists, resembling a barbershop, small, fluorescently lit, too bright. Stax Studio is reduced to graffiti printed on a decaying theatre, dissolved until all that is left is a collage of old textures.

The first vignette, "Far from Yokohama" features Jun and Mitzuko, who have come to see the shrines of Graceland and Sun Studio. They trek through the empty streets and dilapidated neighbourhoods of Memphis in search of their heroes. In "A Ghost" an Italian widow is accompanied by her husband's body. She is forced to spend a night in Memphis. She befriends Dee Dee, who has left her English boyfriend and is heading to Natchez, Mississippi, in search of a better life. "Lost in Space" features Dee Dee's husband Johnny and two odd friends, who get very drunk, rob a liquor store and accidentally shoot the owner. On the run, the three end up at the Arcade Hotel.

The three vignettes all feature the seedy Arcade hotel and all occur within the same twenty-four hour period, none crossing over into the other, yet linked by places, people, scenes of Memphis itself. Shady Billiard Hall, the Arcades Restaurant and the Arcade Hotel appear in each separate story. Some of the exact same camera angles are used in all three stories. It's like an alternate universe. The woman from Rome walks down a twilit street, the same path the Japanese couple had taken earlier. A train rattles by on an overhead bridge. A street, carved between old brick industrial buildings, the same street where the men go careening in their pick-up truck. All three rooms in the hotel contain paintings of Elvis. The Japanese couple and the woman from Rome see him at the beginning of his career. Room 22, where the men end up, contains Elvis in his lounge lizard years.

Each scene is linked by the music on the radio, particularly “Blue Moon” by Elvis Presley. The deadpan night clerk, played by Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, and his bellhop (Cinqué Lee – Spike Lee’s younger brother) hear “Blue Moon” on their radio in the lobby. The men hear the song in the pick-up truck. Tom Waits voices the deejay. Mysterious internal links creating simultaneity, the alternate universe feeling.

The movie is slow and reflective, not the manic American kitsch movie I was half-expecting. Verbal language fails, the characters never do meet on this fateful night where all end up at the same destination. Connection is made through visual sense and feeling. A train passing on the overpass, a car heads under the overpass. The three stories, like three river tributaries, flow in separate directions and meet at one junction.

April 27

Patty visited. She, Fred and I met at Amelio’s after work where we gorged on pizza and drank red wine. Patty suggested we return to our place and watch the hockey game. It was fun! We schlepped the TV out of the bedroom, managed to set it up in the living room, then drank more red wine and munched on popcorn, blissfully absorbed in the game. It was a play-off game between the Habs and Boston, a tight goalies’ game (both sides excellent). Boston won 3-1 and Montréal was out of the play-offs. Now do I do my nationalistic duty and switch allegiance to Edmonton?

The evening wasn’t all hockey, however. In fact, it was an evening of hockey and literature. Patty borrowed Su Croll’s thesis from the library and I read that while Don Cherry blathered. If I had an uncle, drunken or otherwise, would I find Don Cherry amusing? Is he a type most people can relate to? There must be some reason why he’s there blathering away. Su’s poetry is great; intelligent, ironic, well-crafted pop culture references. Patty thinks very highly of Su’s poetry and says she wishes her thesis could be as good.

Patty gave me the first draft of her thesis to read. I thought it was excellent; fine, succinct. I’m impressed by the way she uses voices, particularly her father’s, with respect. She lets them speak for themselves. The emotional impact lies in what is not stated, what does not have to be stated by the poet because it is there in her father’s own words.

The thesis consists of three parts which contain extracts from her father's letters, responses Patty received from Victoria's bureaucracy. I have no idea why Rob Allen felt the need for the voices to be set in different type to be clarified. It was not at all difficult to distinguish them. The entire Concordia program is so cautious!

The poem about the uncle fondling the narrator and her sister in the truck was deeply moving, hypnotic in its restraint. I almost cried. I also found the poems about the father's drinking and the child's perception of his anger very powerful. I have no idea why Patty should rework any part of this thesis.

**

Shoe shopping with Patty. I picked up a pair of cowboyish dress shoes and Patty found "devil shoes." I actually enjoy shopping with her; free and easy. Not once do I feel pressured into buying something, to get some kind of makeover, update my image etc etc. Later, a large group dinner at Casa Grec with David McKnight, Lilian and their friends, many of whom were French. Patty, sitting at the centre of the table, held court. David and Lilian's friends were fascinated by her being from BC and all were interested in her impressions of Montréal.

I've noticed that francophone Montréalers are always asking for people's impressions of the city, and are always so pleased when you like it. I wonder if this is a street-level projection of a basic inferiority that still fuels provincial politics. My impression is that the language laws come from this sense of inferiority. They still need the outsider to define them and as long as this need is there the conflict will continue. I don't know how long it will take until it is dispelled. The families were so large, many people my age are actually at the tail end of the previous generation. Claire Tremblay is near the same age as Fred, yet she is in the middle of a large family and the generations overlap much more closely here than they do in, say, Barrie.

I think the French-English language conflict masks a deeper socio-economic division that exists here. How many generations of educated middle-class Quebecers are there? They don't have to look very far back to find someone in their family who has been a labourer, stereotyped or humiliated by an English commercial elite. All people seem to need a sense of pride. It explains the collective nature of Québec.

Anyway, David and Lilian's friends were all impressed by Patty and they complimented her on her open-mindedness, and she spoke thoughtfully about politics here and in BC. Talked with Roger, who works as a researcher at the National Research Council. I surprised him by saying something about the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. He then demonstrated a physics principle with a drop of water on the table. I asked, "Wouldn't the Heisenberg uncertainty principle cause that?" He laughed and said, "How did you come up with that?" Patty answered, "We writers know all sorts of stuff."

Good talk with Lilian about cats and careers. She was rejected as a doctoral candidate in music and is impatient with teaching. She is tiny, elegant, regal but feisty and opinionated in an interesting, articulate way like Cynthia. David McKnight tried to nudge me into taking the MLIS in September so we would be in the same class. After the Casa Grec we were in a rowdy mood. Lilian and I tap-danced up and down Prince-Arthur. The cowboy shoes held up. We decided to go to the Blue Angel and piled into Fred's car. Roger said he would bike down and join us. We didn't know whether or not he would actually come – but he did.

The Blue Angel is its own world, no sense of a particular country or city surrounding it. It never changes. There's no hope of change, just a sense of refuge, a place to go and hold on. I haven't been to the Blue Angel since Patty's last visit but I recognized a few people and wondered where they go when they aren't at the Blue Angel. It doesn't seem possible they even exist outside this place and I think I would faint if I ever saw one of them on a city street. David, Patty and I enjoy the Blue Angel. Lilian, Fred and Roger were bemused and uncomfortable, unable to understand why we chose to come here. I came to the Blue Angel once with Mary Rose. We danced but MR hated the place. She thought it was tacky and pathetic. Occasionally Indians (from India or Pakistan), Native Canadians and Blacks come in . At first they stand alone in their respective groups. As the evening progresses they join other tables, the Indian dancing with the woman with the cotton-candy hair, becoming part of this world. At first I worried over brawls or racist slurs but I haven't seen this yet. A would-be Sinatra held his microphone fist and lip-synched to the taped music between sets.

The evening ended on a sour note, though. A woman was making her way past our table, obviously intoxicated. She stood at our table, swaying and squinting at us. Like many people Patty laughs a little when she's nervous and unfortunately this triggered the drunk woman. "What are you laughing at?" the woman said to Patty. "How old are you?" "31," said Patty. "Well I'm 35. Do you have any kids?" Patty knew what was coming and she was a class act, sitting very still, attentive, listening to the woman. "No I don't." "I have three kids. I'm older than you are. Wait til you're my age and you've had kids. You have no right to laugh at me like I'm a joke." "No I don't think you're a joke and you're right," said Patty.

The woman left but Patty was shaken and the encounter spoiled her evening. She said that at least she could write a poem about it – some day. The worst thing was how unjust it was. No one deserves to be called out less than Patty. Patty does not come here to laugh. She comes because it reminds her of Port Alberni and she's comfortable here.

**

Paul Auster's Moon Palace features all the usual suspects; lost fathers, beleaguered orphans, mysteriously connected strangers, squandered fortunes, doomed romance. The mythology of the American west is used again, only reworked into a tale within a tale, and its beauty, violence and mysticism an unexpected counterpoint to the vanishing cul-de-sac of New York. I love Paul Auster's books so much.

May 6

Rare Air concert at Club Soda. Not well known in Montréal and we were sitting front row centre. Our favourite music expert from Phantasmagoria was there. He dropped by our table to visit. He's the one who told us about the concert. Every time we go music hunting we go to Phantasmagoria and he's our advisor. Not only is P a much more pleasant environment than Sam the Record Man, they make a point of stocking the store with more alternative, hard-to-find music. We met the day we bought the could player and were looking for our first CDs.

Opening act was an odd folk duet called Soulville. They brought on a bizarre white dub poet to rap on English rights, while the Soulville couple swayed and crooned in the background, every so often interjecting, “Right on!” This so-called rap poet, who looked like Christopher Lloyd in Back to the Future, came out with a ghetto-blaster, was trying to equate the treatment of anglos in Québec with that of urban blacks, which was an insult to real dub poets (not to mention urban black people).

The room was dark and members of Rare Air entered one by one, the sound of bagpipes filling the space with an eerie sound, part call to way and part highland lament. Seamless jazz-oriented Celtic music with Balinese and Tibetan influences – with a little Hendrix thrown in. “Chicago Shopping mall had a Motownish bagpipe sound. Some of the instruments they used were Roto Toms, whistles, wooden concert flutes, a Highland snare drum. Since they aren’t well-known here, the audience was small and there was a real intimacy between performer and audience, and a feeling of being in right from the beginning. The group responded personally and played their hearts out.

May 12

Fred and I went to dinner with Gail and Ravil at le Poissonerie. The Crank (me) and the Grump (Gail) both had frustrating days at work and decided we needed to do something to celebrate Gail’s birthday. We gleefully gorged on Croquille St-Jacques and salmon. Gail looked stunning in black and white, which really set off her lustrous black hair and dark eyes; a glamorous, sultry 1940s look. I get so used to seeing her wearing work smocks or in her motherly role, I forget how much she loves to dress up and make a production out of going out “on the town.” She has a Portuguese ancestor and thinks it explains her colouring and her emotional nature.

After dinner we went to a comedy club. Very dark wood panelling, candlelight. At first we feared this was a mistake. The emcee was a jerk, practicing a brand of insult comedy full of racism and misogyny a la Andrew Dice Clay. Ravil and I were cringing, afraid he might center us out. The emcee was heckled by the audience, the only comedian in the line-up to receive that honour.

Fortunately, the other acts were not similar to the emcee. I don't know where the line is between exposing, calling out racism and being racist. Maybe it's as subtle as a tone of voice but this man was a schoolyard bully. Radio Free Vestibule was literate, focused on language play. Very polished, very CBC. No cracks in the routine, not even a glimpse of an edge. Well-known, well-honed act. Enjoyable because of their literacy. I know I've seen at least one of the trio at McGill. They do have a collegial quality. Mark Jaffe, the headliner, also performed literate comedy and illuminated daily absurdities. I especially liked what he said about wandering around town with a notebook, jotting down observations he could use in his act – just like a writer. Gail was charmed by him and we had an enjoyable evening after all.

**

Found a secluded patch of grass near Nursing Social Work library at lunch and who should come wandering by but Robin Massey. She always unnerves me a little because of her connection to Ed Singer. She sat down beside me and we talked about this and that; an easy casual talk. She looked cool, free, very much her own person. She worked at one of the McGill departments but had just quit her job two weeks or so before her contract was to end, and was trying to get the paperwork straightened up at payroll. Good luck with that. McGill payroll is infamous among contractors. Ed never mentioned she worked at McGill although I heard intimate details of her sex life. She has barely started her term paper on Anne Tyler's *Accidental Tourist*. She has been feeling terribly blocked about her writing. Like me she has two courses to go and doesn't know what to take. She's fed up with the academic side of it. Terry has given her until the end of May to finish the paper. She's taking a personal approach, seeing the book from a writer's viewpoint.

Fred and I went for dinner at Encore Un Fois. Ed Singer was there with his friend Burt. We spoke but said nothing meaningful to each other. He said we should get in touch but undercut that with a wry, ironic smile. Don't call us ...

Aug. 15

First day of automated circulation. I inaugurated the new system. Fun, punchy talk with Cynthia about Captain Clark and his right-wing politics. If Bob is in the right mood he'll join in our conversations. Today we were talking about old radio shows and fathers and Bob told us he went to university on scholarship and by taking on various part-time and summer jobs. Bob is in the Reserves and kids often call, asking for "Captain Clark" - hence his nickname. Gail and I laugh at him. Everything he does is comical; his walk, his ears, his "disinterested English look" as he calls it. It's not a mocking laughter - just something about him tickles our funny bones. The two of us were practically doubled over laughing one day when he walked into the room. Gail teased him about having fantasies about seeing him in his kilt and he blushed. Even Jane got in on the act by mentioning a dream she had of Bob dressed in a stocking cap and trap-door pyjamas at Howard Ross on Christmas morning.

May 16

Neither Jane nor Jodie could go to the Symphony so Jane gave the tickets to Fred and me. We go to Place des arts so rarely it was a quite a treat, exciting, an old-fashioned night on the town, mingling with the upper crust. Our seats were so far up we almost needed ropes and pulleys to make it up to them. People in full symphony regalia; jewelry, furs, hats, suits. Sections of the orchestra appeared on stage, warming up. Eventually the entire orchestra took their seats and became a mighty sea of black and white suites, long skirts and blouses, one one bearing an instrument.

The conductor, Charles Dutoit, came out and bowed to deafening applause. He turned, lifted his arm with the baton, rose up on the balls of his feet, bent, stretched, every part of his body in motion except for his feet, which stayed planted in his own little clearing at the edge of the stage. Rows of people lifted violin bows, tilting them at exactly the same angle, making the same sound at the same time. Lynn Harrell was the guest cellist, showcased in *Cello Concerto in D Minor* by Edouard Lalo. This was only the second time the MSO has played this concerto.

Symphony No 4 in C minor, Opus 43, Shostakovich. This was the first time the MSO performed this hour long symphony. It required a full orchestra including four flutes, two piccolos, six clarinets, eight horns, two tubas, six clarinets, six tympani, two harps, a dozen percussion instruments and an enlarged string section. Throughout the orchestra rehearsals there was unrest among the musicians over the music and the conductor didn't even understand the score! The composer, Shostakovich, himself withdrew the symphony in 1936. It seems as if our first MSO concert was really special.

First part of the symphony was a funeral march. The third part a dialogue for piccolo and bass clarinet. Trombone solos intruded to create a circus atmosphere. In the fifth part, the brass section intoned until building to a climax when suddenly, at the height of the frenzy, the huge orchestra collapsed, energy spent. Over the deep pedal rose a mournful sound, played initially by the solo horn, giving a sense of stillness and oppressive darkness. Delicate tones of the celesta drifted upward against a dark background of the C-minor chord. The music drifted away into eternity, the last note from the celesta left imagined, unplayed, as Shostakovich's sound and fury faded to the threshold of audibility.

Two huge harps stood at the side, strings glistening in light, carved frames graceful and so medieval looking. Two women kept vigil by the harps, only occasionally running their fingers along the shimmering strings. Act of faith to stand there like acolytes, waiting to briefly play and then recede to the background again. The climax was thrilling with every musician completely focused in a synchronized unit. Bows flew up, trombones slid, mutes were placed in and out of tubas with sleight-of-hand finesse, the cellists' arms back and forth – all occurring at once!

**

Long walk up one of the streets near Jarry. North St-Denis a solid wall of rowhousing, duplexes, triplexes with spiral staircases and balconies. The street is like one long building, all brown brick, distinguished by individual flourishes, statements of belief. People everywhere. A group wearing party hats jay-walking most insouciantly. Huge Québec flags mounted on walls. You could likely gauge the political mood of the city by its posters and flags.

A year ago there were “Ne touchez pas la loi 101” signs everywhere. Now there are flags. And poplar seed! Poplar seed voyaging through the air, the finest gentlest snowfall imaginable. Hundreds of seeds lining the tiny yards all the way down the street like dream snow, shifting with the breeze. Turned and walked down the next street. An abrupt change. Black people on the corner speaking French, groups of Indian women in saris. Two streets so close and so different. One homogeneous and nationalistic, the other a cosmopolitan market place.

May 26

Dinner at Karen and Ken’s. Good conversation, interesting people. Met Wahpoo (?) from Malawi, who is in Ken’s program at Queen’s, Karen’s friend Kathy who works for the Status of Women. Also met Ken’s former room-mate Steve, who works in shipping-customs. Steve is a left-wing, trade-unionist Englishman, looks like he just walked off the set of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*; leather jacket, big black boots, buzz-cut hair. He was articulate, opinionated, started arguments then backed off before anyone could really take the bait by saying, “I’m just playing devil’s advocate.”

Kathy’s feminism was interesting. It often seems ironic to me that I, with all my political opinions and soapboxes, find myself in groups like this, in talks like this, so seldom. I’m in a Master’s Degree program in Montréal and I still don’t meet people like very often. Why do I always seem to find myself with so many people who are traditional and conservative? No matter how stimulating the conversation, I will simply never have any contact with these people again.

It was also interesting to see Ken with his peers on his intellectual turf, hearing him expound on the US constitution, talking “history” with Steve and Wahpoo, leaving the rest of us in the dust. Karen and Kathy left the room. Fred and I stayed, only occasionally interjecting a comment. The only time Steve paid any attention to me was when I talked about Greil Marcus’s book, *Lipstick Traces*.

Eventually the attention turned to Wahpoo. Ken dragged out an atlas and we found Malawi on the map, a slender strip of land locked between Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania. High altitude, some mountainous regions. Half the country is a lake (Lake Malawi), and its borders follow this long lake. We all subjected Wahpoo to our “20 Questions in Geography” routine. What is the GNP of Malawi? What does it grow? What are its chief exports? Even intelligent, self-aware people can’t break out of that school geography class mold, asking the same stupid questions that never interested us in our school days. We can’t break out of the mold of considering these “facts” important, things you need to know about a country. So Wahpoo, a very pleasant patient man from a country very different from Canada, ends up answering the most banal questions. Until we all became a little more comfortable with each other, this question-answer form of conversation prevailed, turning Wahpoo into an ambassador or public relations rep for his country instead of one of Ken’s friends and colleagues.

This question-answer corset finally split when Wahpoo talked about Malawi’s president-for-life, a man in his early 60s. He showed us a newspaper clipping, which depicted “the big man” dancing in a nightclub, drink in hand. He’s a notorious womanizer and his wife ignores this and carries on as the regal representative of the country. This president is so paranoid about communism that Malawi has become one of South Africa’s greatest allies, the only country in the region propping up the apartheid regime just so communists won’t take over. Now that was interesting.

**

Went to see *Spirit of the Beehive*.

“Someone to whom I lately showed in my crystal beehive, the spinning of that wheel as visible as the main wheel of a clock ... the constant agitation of the honeycomb ... the continuous mysterious maddened flight of the nurse over the cradle of the bees still unborn, the animated bridges and stairs built by the workers, the invaded spirals of the queen, the varied and unceasing activity of the multitude, the cruel and useless effort, the feverish and arduous comings and goings, the sleep, unknown out of cradles ...”

(from the movie *Spirit of the Beehive*)

First, the mysterious land, space, isolation, perpetual candlelight. Folded shadow-wings, moon haunted, child's life inside the beehive, golden honeycombed windows, cells. "Thoughts for Shadowed Days." Pillowcases of dream where they rest their hearts. School, where they sing numbers into being. Endless winding road, after-school walks, railroad tracks, trains cloaked in smoke. Frankenstein's creature floats flowers at the riverbank with a small beautiful child. Torchlight search parade in forest, needles of rain. Audience sliding their chairs to be as close to the performance as possible, perhaps each one hoping to be the one to walk into the screen.

June 8

Helped Karen and Ken move. Karen is on her way to join Ken in Kingston. Glad to help but very sorry they're officially moving. Karen as gracious and good-natured as always. They had no other people helping them and I'm certain they never even asked anyone. It is just like them to do most of the heavy work by themselves so as not to put us out. They are generous to a fault, and helped us move. Although we felt we hadn't been that helpful they treated us to dinner at a German sausage place on Cote-des-neiges. We sat outside, sampled beer and sausages. Ken and I ended up in a long discussion about *the Economist*, which somehow led to deconstruction.

June 16

Cutler finally did it got herself hitched after all those years of talking about it. The wedding and reception were both held at the Legion and everybody in the wedding party had been drinking since early afternoon. A working-class wedding with middle aged people whooping it up, a bride and groom who seldom came together and may as well have been at two separate weddings. All that was missing were the lampshades and New Year's Eve hats. Cutler made her usual dry quips, pulled face-jobs. She danced on one of the chairs. "Dippy-doo-dil-it is, Cutler!" I yelled. It was that kind of wedding.

**

Mary Rose has entered an interesting new phase in her life. She has separated from Morrie and has built up a network of female friends. She's moving from place to place, staying with various friends, house-sitting. Right now, she's sitting for her friend Julia and she had a little party this evening.

June 22

Marsha and John spent the night at our place and then we drove to Maine. Stopped at St Johnsbury, Vermont, for lunch, then at Conway to pick up booze – another tradition. Nice to see Maine in summer. All the flaming trees are bright green, a lush, rolling land. We were able to snag another cottage with Mrs Craig at Cape Porpoise. This time we had the Joshua Hutchings cottage. A very Washington Irving-Nathaniel Hawthorne atmosphere. Blend of British and French-Canadian influences in New England. Enormous single family frame dwellings enclosed by walls, hedges, fences. An underlying eeriness. Some of the larger houses are weird and spooky with their attics, cupolas, porthole windows. The house across the street from Mrs Craig's could easily be a private asylum.

Lobster at the Captain's Table, served by Betty the waitress who smokes the long cigarillos. Marsha's mother, the United Church minister, did the funeral service for Marsha's father and grandfather. I think Marsha's grief for her grandfather is sharper, cleaner, less ambivalent than the grief for her father. She describes her father as an essentially good, moral man and turns his tantrums into expressions of righteous anger. And then her lunar side shines through the idealism when she turns around and says there is no doubt they were abused children.

On one of their family trips to Mexico they were detained at the border for a long time. The customs officer insisted on ransacking their car and camper. Mr Smith was enraged. He started pelting his lunch and the contents of a grocery bag at the customs station and had his children do the same thing. Marsha was ambivalent even in telling the story. She knew his rage was childish and could get the family in big trouble. Yet she said he was right to protest. And it is certainly the kind of incident that triggers her own rage.

I get an interesting impression of all the Smith kids: Marguerite the oldest, the good girl, quiet housewife, dominated by her husband. Martin, gloomy eccentric hermit, drinking too much beer and scaring people by playing Kate Bush over speakers in his bathroom. (He is the one I would most love to meet.) Mark, large, jovial, hail-fellow-well-met. Derek the lawyer and political hound, and Donnalee who sleeps with professors and lives in a fantasy world.

Marsha said she completely understands what Sharon went through and why Sharon turned against people. She's even thinking about communicating with Sharon again. I hope it's not just a competitive thing, because Marsha can't stand the thought of Sharon having the last word. Both are master controllers and sometimes I still feel like the third point of a still charged triangle.

She told a story of the drug dealers who moved in next door to her parents in Niagara Falls. Cars driving up and down the street at all hours of the night, fights, beer bottles, people landing in the Smith driveway, Marsha being grilled by one of those people while walking up her own driveway on a visit. The drug dealers bought the Smith property when Marsha's mother ("Marge-mom") moved to lead her church in Dalston. A rather dark story but told hilariously. A Marsha-Smith-confronted-by-the-absurd story.

Misty morning at Cape Porpoise harbour. Saw the dock-cats, mother and kitten. Stacks of lobster traps creating spiky black silhouettes. Gutted fish. The tide crept out, exposing rock shelves, clam shells, a shopping cart. Tide rolled back in, mysterious gathering motion. Shopping cart submerged again. Felt like the coast of England. Fog softened, concealed, all but erased the small boats on the water and the grey frame houses.

The boats were there, almost invisible, almost like objects you could only detect by a sixth sense. It was as if you could only see them because you knew they were there. No beginning, no end, no separation of earth, sky and water. Riotous foliage all along the coast. Banks of flowers, shrubs, stone walls. A lonely self-sufficiency. Colours so intense in the fog and dark sky. Tethered boats bobbing in ether. The sky opened and we took refuge in a café.

Drove to Biddeford, an industrial town resembling Trois-Rivières, and on to Old Orchard Beach, which in light rain and fog looked like Lew Archer territory. The ocean looked vast, endless, waves rearing up, shattering down again. People wandered the disappearing beach dressed every way imaginable, from bikinis to sweaters. Couples wrapped themselves up in towels. The beach became a treadmill-walk, everything erased by fog. Saw the script “Waverley Hotel” before I could distinguish the building itself. Clusters of people reduced to silhouettes, essences. Seaweed scrollwork. Deserted waterslide, its twists and curves veiled by a filmy curtain, as if it is too space-age or alien to reveal to the public. Sand fluid as water. Ghostly pier in the background. No reflections, all one dimension, one plane of existence.

It started to pour and we took refuge at an inn and whiled away the afternoon at the bar talking with Chester and his parrot. Fred walked down to the ocean, camera bag slung over his shoulder, disappearing into fog and ocean spray. I was relieved to him reappear. We were the only people in the bar and I felt very mellow in a wicker chair, drinking beer, ceiling fan revolving overhead. Chester said he was afraid this would be a very bad tourist season. Its St-Jean-de-Baptist weekend and usually crammed with Quebecers. Here it is the bell-wether weekend and hardly anyone is here – not a good sign for the season. Chester was relieved by Alice from West Virginia, who prepared us liqueur concoctions she had never made before, She had to consult the recipe cards and even phoned someone for instructions. We were very happy to let her practice her skills on us.

Eventually we could see patches of light in the sky, reflections of the pier in the water. You could distinguish between sand and sky. People and objects regained corporeality, features, details. Order once again restored in its mysterious way. Then we discovered John’s car had been towed because he had parked by a curb that was painted yellow. We had to take a taxi to the police station to reclaim it. John, Marsha and Fred were furious. I was way too tipsy to muster up any anger. Marsha called the woman in the police station an “illiterate reprobate.” The woman said, “What did you say?” My heart sang, figuring we would end up in the county jail, three raving loons and a drunkard. Luckily nothing happened. John stated bluntly that he had no intention of paying the ticket and the student cop just shrugged. Back to the Captain’s Table for lobster dinner. Betty had kept our champagne from the night before.

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Burlington on the return journey. Another feast at What's Your Beef. The cavernous one downtown was closed so we had to settle for its upscale cousin. Our usual campsite has disappeared but we found a nice one at Burlington Beach. Maybe it's because I'm listening to David Sylvian's *Brilliant Trees* but writing this account of the trip is giving me a ghostly feeling. The fog and rain, presence of the ocean, seamless merging of earth sea and sky, the material world reduced to shapes and planes, the moodiness, the deaths in Marsha's family. I can't shake the ghostliness of this trip.

June 25

First St-Jean-de-Baptiste parade in fifteen years. Hours before the parade was scheduled to start people were already collecting on corners, lining the streets, propping up lawn chairs. The usual flag yahoos lugging cases of beer. Québec flags unfurling up and down the street. A fun political song I caught on CKUT sprang to mind: "Meech Meech / Political breach / Behind closed doors / and out of reach / I'm Bou Bou bourassa / not necessarily sovereignty / But sovereignty if necessary." I know I only caught a few words to this song but it sounds like the most Canadian thing I have ever heard.

July 1

Another summer on Tillemont. The Wonderful World of Transportation now includes long white wedding Cadillacs making their way down Delorimier. Places look as if they will just keep on cruising right through the bedroom window, and of course the hazy lazy days of muscle cars, their boom-boom-boom making the building vibrate. Gang of machos clustered at the café on the corner nearest the park setting off firecrackers. Canada Day weekend and in our tiny corner of the country flags are flying – the fleur-de-lys and the noble orange-green-white of Italy. Italy is a contender in the World Cup and Italian flags are flapping from cars, bicycles, rollerskates, etc. Everything except the Maple Leaf.

Boris and Natasha have been brawling at the kitchen door. Three neighbourhood cats are showing up at the screen door at all hours of the night and our two mighty defenders are on the job. Surété Tillemont on the case. Natasha is the real back-alley brawler here. Boris tends to sink and switch his tail, not wanting to rumple his immaculate coat.

**

Shuffle Demons at the Jazz Festival - under the tent on Jeanne-Mance. Real cut-ups capering across the stage in bright jungle-print outfits. Met the guy from Phantasmagoria again and learned his name is Sebastian. About time we actually introduced ourselves! After the show we found ourselves at the corner of St-Laurent by the infamous Harvey's and the hookers were out in full force. Bewildered tourists in bright preppie clothes gazing into the windows of a leather and sadomasochism boutique. We were going to see a Latin salsa group but the crowds became restless, aggressive. Skinheads and bikers appeared. We slunk through the crowd and exited the festival.

July 9

'A nice big unqualified A from Terry Byrnes on my long and rambling Anne Tyler paper. (Why *do* critics classify her as a minimalist?) His comments were favourable but as always, written in that coded way which always leaves room for doubt. Praise with faint damnation, maybe. I still find his comments difficult to unpack. He ended with this though: "I've a few quibbles, but this is a very well-written essay. Your active, unforced prose and figurative language kept it active and engaging even when I was starting to get lost in the titles, events and names. May I keep (and show) a copy of this?"'

July 14

Fred surprised me by preparing the car and telling me we were going on a “short putt-putt.” We passed the little haunted house I so wanted to rent, the oil storage tanks out at the Pointe-aux-trembles refineries. All the pipes have been painted in bright primary colours as if disguising them as Fisher Price toys. With the colours, round smooth shapes the pipes look as if they have been snapped into place by children playing and appear no more threatening than toys. We kept going, cruising along the North Shore, passing hundreds of casse-croûtes, ice cream and frites stands.

Saw Trois-Rivières from the highway, a glimpse of narrow frame buildings, which strongly resembled those of Biddeford and other industrial towns in Maine and Massachusetts. Then a long, fluid graceful drive into Québec City. Passed many houses with symbols affixed to the doors, resembling Pennsylvania Dutch symbols, only these bore family names, some sort of symbol or crest and (probably) the name of the region where the family originated. These started appearing after Trois-Rivières, increasing as we neared Québec City. Also a lot of roadside shrines, stark crosses and oddly flamboyant crucifixes. The usual Ste-Marie-de-bains on yards. Elaborate gazebos containing graphic crucifixes. A black Christ twisted in agony on a blinding white cross. Religion and genealogy, two streams flowing into Québec nationalism.

The Southern United States was similar. Only this more northern land isn’t suffused in the same kind of light as the southern states. The land itself doesn’t have that “Elysian fields,” timeless Arcadian quality. Here, you get the agrarian, religious and genealogical with a gritty tough industrial north.

It took forever to actually enter Québec City. The last forty kilometres was a treadmill, a loop of the same villages and roadside stands we already passed. The skyline appeared without warning. The first thing we saw were government buildings and I was surprised by the number of traditional British pubs I saw (like Ottawa). We drove through the café-restaurant area where every place had a long queue. Here there were trees, long yards, mansions set back from the street. Most of the tourists clustered in “Vieux Québec.” Yet I was most intrigued by the the little old shuttered houses sloping down to the river without trees to break their fall. Tough areas where the industrial is so mixed with the historical. I suppose this entire country is like that.

The Grande Allée has an Upper Canada Village feel to it. From the top of the hill I could see people swarming around 200 year-old stone buildings. I think Chester's gloomy tourist prophecy has come true. Not nearly as many people as I expected especially for such a warm mid-summer day. A bad tourist season all over by the looks of it. Grim warehouse with barred windows, security signs posted everywhere at the end of a tourist promenade. Glut of textures. Chalky, flowy walls of houses, painted shutters, sloping Utrillo roofs. Weathered brick and stone, doorways opening onto the street, boarded up garage, stone house looking like a cave. An entire city carved out of rock. Young man in biker clothes disappears into a stairway. A woman crawls in through her ground-floor window while her friend calls to her from the corner. I wish I could have spent more time prowling around this area of the city.

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To Gail and Ravil's for lasagna and videos. We watched *Traffic*, which they had taped from Masterpiece Theatre. This was a compelling show, full of connecting layers, story-lines, ambiguous characters. So much more complex and subtle than any American show on the same subject. There were no real heroes or villains, just complex human beings caught up in societal and economic forces beyond their control. The photography was hypnotic, especially the fields of blue poppies against the layers of misty mountains. Bleak beauty. I also liked the connection made between the Muslims smoking opium and the British policeman with his endless glasses of beer. Many many subtle links like this throughout the show. Gail said the show changed her mind about the farmers who harvest crops for the druglords. She used to think the farmers were criminals but no longer sees it that way.

Aug. 10-11

Visited Karen and Ken in Kingston. Marsha's other grandfather died and they went to the ocean – just her and John. Visiting Karen and Ken was a delight from beginning to end. Karen was especially glad to see us. She's been lonely in Kingston and her new job at Kingston Psychiatric Hospital is a handful. We are their first overnight visitors.

The political in-fighting at the KPH was getting her down. Luckily, that situation has eased off. Karen isn't a devious manipulative person and has no use for office politics. She does everything at the new job, including typing catalogue cards (which she loathes), opening mail, etc, both librarian and technician. She says the bureaucracy is even worse than McGill's and the simplest requisition form has to go through Toronto. She really isn't sure she wants to stay in Kingston. Ken agreed they would try it for two years. They live in the bottom section of a house just around the corner from Marsha and John, and are quite surprised and bewildered by the rag-tag neighbourhood, nice little houses interspersed with rowhouses, old brick buildings housing bikers, etc. I told them we call the area "Munchkinville."

Ken joined us. He was working on his dissertation in his Watson Hall office. Shortly after Karen moved he went to the National Archives in Ottawa to research 1734 treaties between the French and the Native peoples. We talked about the Mohawk blockade at Oka.

Fred and I drove out there last week looking for the peace march and to contribute some food. It was a still hazy day, rolling pastures, woods, leaves that did not move. Silent except for the chirring of cicadas. I could only too well imagine the scene cranked out by a journalist: "It is difficult to believe that the town of Oka nestled in its peaceful countryside could be the site of explosive confrontation, violence that could change the entire face of our nation ..." A steady train of cars, jeeps, vans, campers passed us, all bound for the beach. No sign of any peace march. We decided to venture to the town to see if we could find it but the SQ had the road blocked. We could see the roof of the monastery shimmering past the blockade. A burly cop stopped us, leaned on the car with both hands in an extremely intimidating pose. Fred spoke in English. The cop asked if he spoke French. When Fred said yes he barked, "Parlez Français." He did tell us we had the wrong day for the march.

We talked about our upcoming trip to Europe and Ken brought out some maps. He was in Prague in 1983, before he knew Karen, at Christmas time. He said Christmas in Prague was nothing special. Not the dark fir trees lightly glazed with snow, candles glowing from shuttered windows, the majesty of the cathedrals. No, it was a miserable drizzle and fish barrels everywhere. They eat fish for Christmas – not the roast goose I had imagined. The vendors pull fish out of the barrels and cut them up right there on the street. Ken was lucky.

He met a Jewish man, Mr Janowitz, who showed him around the Old Quarter – which is also the Jewish Quarter. Mr J is one of very few survivors of the Prague ghetto. He showed Ken the statues Jews were forced to erect along the bridge, crucifixes. Ken showed us a photo he had taken of one of the crucifixes the Jews had to erect. They also had to write about the glory of Christ on the statue and renounce their faith. Yet because they wrote in Hebrew they slipped some extra words into the text, along the lines of “in your face.”

Ken is observant, perceptive, full of insights about places and politics like Patty. It was interesting to hear his impressions of Kingston. He doesn't like it, or Eastern Ontario in general, very much. He's originally from BC and finds Eastern Ontario very parochial, the way they cling to background and a particular form of Britishness that comes out in Loyalist fervour, Orange Day parades, the anti-French, anti-Catholic bedrock he hasn't encountered in quite the same way anywhere else. Everyone is from one background and they expect everyone else to be the same. He said Kingston is pretty, the biking and swimming are nice, but it's just a pretty face on the closed-in limestone of people and attitudes that don't change.

He asked me about Barrie and I said I didn't grow up with that kind of baggage. It was a dull little city where everyone was the same. Ken asked what the prevalent background was and I said the division that most stood out for me was between old-time rural Barrie and the new-comers from Toronto. There's no Eastern Ontario limestone history in Barrie, but people there cling to a rural past and seem to be in denial they are an hour away from Canada's largest city. So on the one hand you have people like me praying for the Go Train and others resisting it with all their might. It is a very rapidly growing city and maybe that's why it doesn't have the same insular baggage.

Ken said the rise of Vander Zalm was possible only in BC. There is a closed-in bedrock of BC people who have grown up clinging to certain forms of British background. BC is different from Eastern Ontario though because of the influx of outsiders, recent arrivals and large communities of Chinese and Japanese people. I really wish Patty could have been with us.

Sometimes Ken does seem a little single-minded. Karen moved to Kingston not knowing anyone and started a new stressful job and he couldn't shelve the damned thesis long enough to be with her and help her settle in. But after seeing them again I don't think he will become a self-obsessed, arrogant academic leaving Karen behind in his history book dust. He's approaching this thesis with the fervour of the newly-converted. His background is interesting. His mother is Jewish – Lithuanian. His mother's grandparents were communists and her parents renounced communism, and presumably their Jewishness. Ken has no full brothers or sisters but a slew of halfs and steps. He showed us a picture of one half-brother, Joel, who looks like a rabbi and sends him funny postcards.

So easy to talk to Karen. Such a nice flowing exchange between all four of us. Very refreshing. She is fresh and natural, loves happy endings. I loved seeing her and Ken washing dishes together singing songs from *The Little Mermaid*. Karen is very close to her family, which is very much female-dominated; two sisters, a father who died when she was young.

We went to the Kingston Brew Pub on Friday night, sitting out on the warm night, then to Mexicali Rosa's for dinner. Karen and Ken had a fight on the way back from the restaurant. Ken appeared to be lecturing Karen, gesturing. Fred and I were afraid it was about us, and this time we couldn't bail out and go around the corner to Marsha and John's. Turned out that the fight was about the tip – a classic stupid fight and Ken was extremely apologetic the next morning.

On Saturday afternoon Ken went to work in his office. Fred, Karen and I wandered downtown, down Bagot Street, past buildings that were built for the centuries, foundations anchored into earth. Blooming flower boxes. I wonder how particular flowers became such commodities for humans. We continued on, crossing the border into the dream-world campus and Pervert Park, which looked exactly as it had when I used to skip classes with Val. Fading crests on sidewalks.

Felt like I was walking straight into the past when I entered Watson Hall, where Ken shares a pleasant office with three other teaching assistants. Not the dungeons of the Norris building. Ken's slice of room features a huge poster of Morrissey. Returning through Pervert Park we regaled Ken with tales from *Unsolved Mysteries*. His reaction was fun. "So the three of you spend your time watching sordid TV shows eh?" This eerily still afternoon just seemed to evoke *Unsolved Mysteries*. Only sign of life was at a student laundromat. When we returned, Karen insisted we watch *The Little Mermaid*, which is her favourite movie.

Spent a great Sunday at Kingston Mills watching the goats go through the locks, which is a lot more interesting than it sounds. The locks creak open, water gathers and swirls, the first boats enter. Optical illusion of boats appearing to be on one level. The timed and measured water rushes in and the boats appear to drop to ground level. Karen and I found it quite hypnotic, the gathering water, the way it mysteriously came to life, and not missing the point at which the boats appear to drop while standing still.

Swim in Lake Ontario, perfect ending to a perfect weekend. Glimpse of Treasure Island in the distance, Karen and Ken playing like dolphins, Karen and I talking about how wonderful it would be if we could live underwater like in *The Little Mermaid*.

Aug. 15

A "salon" held at Ya'acov and Kayla's. A doctor friend of theirs, Neil, gave a talk on artificial insemination and how it relates to the Gemara. The talk and questions were lively and the doctor was enthusiastic about his subject. He had given this talk at Concordia and it was a real feather in Ya'acov's cap getting him to speak at this little gathering in his apartment. Interesting cross-section of people, as always. Another Neil, very Orthodox, kippa-clad, ceaselessly grumbled over Dr Neil's interpretations. This Neil turned out to be one of those pompous windbags who always know best. He was also a boor, pouring two beers into a jar and drinking from the jar. His wife Natalie, dressed to the nines, big hair, is an aspiring singer who has appeared on "Star Search." She said she lost the competition because she's religious and her skirt was too long. Always meet so many interesting people through Yak and Kay.

Aug. 17

Farewell party for Cynthia and me at Bob's military club, which very much resembled the McGill faculty club. A good afternoon, lively conversation, no shop-talk for once. For some reason Jane's voice has picked up an English intonation. Maybe one more step toward her self-recreation, or maybe she's just been seeing a lot of Ailsa lately. At any rate, the inflection in her voice is yet one more thing she has added. She is fascinating that way.

Received the usual farewell and good luck card but it was Jane's comment that brought me close to tears. "Dear Lesley, Thank you for being so reliable, such a quick learner and always taking on extra tasks to help the rest of us. You've been great, and I'll miss you. Love, Jane. PS: I'll be watching for your name in the book pages of the Gazette. PPS: I know you'll be a great TA." She also wrote something nice in Cynthia's card and as she said when we compared notes, "So the Janester has a sentimental side after all!"

Not as difficult facing Gail as I had feared. That's because we're not saying goodbye. Kindred spirits are hard to find.

Aug. 18

Kingston again, this time to visit Marsha and John. Breakfast with Karen and Ken. Rainy day, Marsha feeling sluggish and disoriented. Her other grandfather died recently and she has been subdued. Their new house is filled with pieces of furniture and mementoes from her grandparents' houses. She also said she now knows exactly how Sharon felt and why she behaved the way she did. Marsha is also feeling low because she doesn't have anyone in Kingston who really understands, or wants to know, what she is going through. I think going through a death is like being exiled to a another country, another universe, some kind of mapless territory no one can quite reach.

Weird bookstore open. Marsha and I spent ages picking out old detective books. Terrifying sunflowers and all sorts of scrawled notes posted everywhere. A lot of second-hand bookstores are eccentric; this is a wild, lunatic store.

On to Diane Keon's cottage. I have never seen Diane K without an entourage of people. I did enjoy seeing her though, as usual pleasantly surprised by the steel-trap intelligence lying behind the highly social, somewhat scattered appearance. I enjoyed myself at this gathering, talked to Johns Keon and Futtitt and Bill, of all people. Good old Bill is still talking about turning *The Aunt Marjorie Chamber* into a screenplay and selling it to Atlantis.

Aug. 20

Short-term job woes over. Theo Lawrence from McLennan Cataloguing called me. They want me to come work for them on a special NOTIS project. I'm to come in and get details on September 25. When I told Gail, we hugged, kissed and snoopy-danced for hoy. Good news for Cynthia as well. She is likely getting a sessional job at McLennan Circulation.

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Wonderful letter from Marsha:

“... one thing I do know though Bat. You are a hell of a writer and this might be the time. Fred is supportive and sustaining. Montreal gives you only what that city can out of all of Canada; and you deepen and grow more complex as you get older. Thus developing into an ever intriguing author and person. You have it my girl, as nebulous as “it” is and that is a powerful wonderful part of you. The Bats of the world rise above crummy office jobs. I hear the song ‘The Whole of the Moon’ and know that it is someone like you that this song is about.”

Aug. 31

Packed. Took car to St-Sauveur where Dave and Claire fêted us with pâté, crackers and the alcohol-free champagne, which is their newest business enterprise, these two great laissez-faire new age people. Good talk with Claire before Dave arrived. She has really opened up in our recent get-togethers and I have a feeling for her viewpoint and humour. D and C accompanied us to Mirabel and saw us off. They like hanging around airports too. We wandered around, commenting on the various nationalities clustered at particular counters. The Aeroflot counter was next to KLM, and the woman behind that counter was tough and burly, hair scroched into a tight bun.

Disorientation began after we said our goodbyes and were then herded onto a bus, which reminded me of entering the Medivac van from the hospital without setting foot in the outside world. Unreal internal voyage from the moment of entering customs to stepping off the plane in Amsterdam. No more concept of an outside world, only following others through grey passages. Blue lights along the runway. Six hours in a state of being neither awake nor asleep, again just like the hospital. Played mind games with myself about time and space and wondered what would be happening in Canada if I had travelled six hours into the future there. Woke up, it was 8 am and freezing.

Stepped into Amsterdam airport, 6 hours into the future and collected baggage. Saw my first black Bart Simpson t-shirt. Never seen so many natural blonds in my life. Fred's hair colour very common and I teased him. Array of porno in magazine shops, visible, accessible, focusing on inflated breasts, "die Bussen." Fred found it strange, able to speak Dutch and ask questions without knowing the simple givens, assumed knowledge of a place or culture. He didn't know he had to dial a zero before the number to reach his Oma, yet he was able to ask how to make the call.

Dream train through the countryside. First and second class compartments on commuter trains, a reminder of basic class structure that is visible everywhere in Europe. Passed some working windmills, glimpses of canals and barges, fishermen camped on the banks under umbrellas. So jet-lagged it was like being anesthetized, floating in and out of consciousness. Two very groggy people at Deventer station waiting for Oma.

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Eefde. Charming brown brick houses with sloped roofs of black or orange tile. Big, polished picture windows with lace curtains. Curtains never drawn. These windows are like lakes, mirrors, lives lived to see and be seen. I have heard that many houses have mirrors mounted on the walls so people can see the street from their living rooms. I saw one of these mirrors in Zutphen, mounted just like a car mirror. At all times of the day I could walk down the street and look in at people eating, watching TV etc, and after a while I found myself wishing they would pull their curtains because they were invading my privacy!

Closeness to nature, something I hadn't expected. A storybook nature though, lush vegetation, wilderness gardens, great old leafy trees. Night walk down a curving cobblestoned lane. I heard cooing, crooning sounds, soft rolled rrrs, and saw a tree full of birds, little pheasants (partridges?), one roosting on every branch. Had it not been for these quiet chirbling sounds I would never have noticed them concealed in leafy darkness. Made me think of old English folk songs.

Cute little cars and commercial vehicles, intricately painted roads. An easy natural efficiency. This country is truly a paradise for cyclists. Red brick roads reserved for cyclists and scooters with a separate network of signs and lights. Everyone rides a bike and it's not a health fad, it's a way of life. Grandmothers, old men with cigar stubs clamped between their lips, kids, mothers and babies, businesspeople in suits. The bicycles themselves are interesting, built for all purposes, equipped with front and back seats. Babies usually ride in front and very often cyclists carry passengers in the back. Since cycling is an entire parallel transit system all across the country there is no need for helmets or regulations against double-riding. I am so envious.

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Oma's house, Spijkerpad. Walls and roof deep in clinging vine. Stone figures streaked with moss. Down a long driveway, hidden behind lush vegetation is a medieval orange-tiled house filled with objets d'arts and trinkets from all over the world. A statue in every corner, reminding me a bit of André Malraux's plunder from Indochina. In fact I often thought of Indochina or Vietnam while exploring the grounds, especially when I came across a rain-worn Eastern statue.

I imagined crawling into the jungle coming across pagodas and temples the way American soldiers stumbled upon these treasures. Colonialism is something I am well aware of, particularly through literature, but here I feel I'm experiencing it firsthand, life through the eyes of a colonialist. I've never even met anyone with Oma's background before.

Oma (whose name is Non) is a fascinating woman, complex, full of contradictions. Sometimes formal and severe, sometimes mischievous and twinkly. She will imperiously "have you" do something and then thank you very profusely when you do what she ordered you to do. She lectures Fred on his behaviour, recalling events from years ago. She scolds him for wanting to see Europe rather than visit family then turns around and confesses that she understands why he doesn't want to spend the time visiting. She talks about the foolishness of running one's life by doling out money, yet she controls her entire family by giving out money, promising to give out money, threatening to withdraw money – not to mention her frequent "surprises." Oma has her "help," a maid and gardener, also Léonie and her husband who live like serfs in the small connecting house. Yet she says she never asks anyone for help. (Probably because she doesn't need to ask.) She often denigrates religion yet she's fascinated by all sorts of religions, always wants to pick people's brains on the subject, and so much of the art she has collected is religious, devotional, Catholic.

The house is so medieval inside it gives me goose-bumps. Makes me think of an inn in the Carpathians with the Eastern-Orthodox-Catholic artifacts. A cloud wanders across the moon, interval of darkness, a narrow mountain path in the Carpathians. A drawbridge creaks open revealing the moss-covered steps leading to the wine cellar. Shadows gather around huge cabinets and another wooden door creaks open to the water closet where you flush by pulling on a great chain and the marble sink is in the hallway, carved into the wall.

Pick a door. You know not where it will lead. Another unexpected room, closet, pantry, attic or exit perfect for midnight escape into the mountains. Creep in through the wooden door down the solemn dark hall, cabinets made for giants looming as dark and solemn as the mountains themselves. Your eye travels upwards to the ornately carved cuckoo clock straight out of Pinocchio. The secret doorway leads to a walled garden. Leaves and vines shimmy over two round windows. Crawl inside the cabinet with the ramparts, listen to the pounding of hoofbeats outside keeping time with the pounding of your own heart.

Three chandeliers in the great hall, made of iron and scarlet glass. The hall is vast and you've entered an inn deep in the Carpathians where an old woman ushers you inside the great doors and you sit on a wooden chair, eat bread and cheese, drink from an earthen jug of wine and the highwayman goes riding riding riding.

The garage doors have iron hinges like blooming fleurs-de-lys. A lantern dangles overhead, ivy hanging over the roof, creeping across the wall. Meanwhile in the distance I hear the train bells again like dinner bells or briskly clapping hands, "People, people, please come to order now." And I'm back in the Netherlands. Jumble of radio stations; Dutch, German, Radio Luxembourg and the ubiquitous BBC, filled with news of Iraq. Not as bellicose as the US, the Brits are full of rhetoric, blabbing every hour on the hour the plight of the hostages. Heard every type of music imaginable; rhythm and blues, ten year old arena rock, light Europop. "I've Been Thinking About You" (London Beat) will forever remind me of this trip.

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Drove Oma's car into Deventer, the perfect place to begin our explorations. Distances here are deceptive. I'm starting to develop a more European sense of distance. Maybe it's because although the towns are so close to each other they are separate entities, not linked by the never-ending slum of suburbs. Deventer felt farther away from Eefde than it actually is. While driving into town I glimpsed two prostitutes sitting in sparkling clean picture windows. They were both sitting on chairs wearing girdles and garter belts as if posing for painters. I had heard about the prostitutes in Deventer but had not expected such visibility or formal poses and set-up.

Beautifully preserved buildings. Found a “shoarma” place down an alleyway. The owner is a Turkish Jew who said there are very few Dutch Jews. Also saw some frosh being initiated, which made me realize it is September and the students are out in full force. The prevalence of graffiti all over the country is curious, considering the order and cleanliness of the town. Mostly just tags, names rendered in a very bulbous script. Very few political comments. One “Boycott Royal Dutch Shell” written in English.

Back in Eefde we walked to the slouse. Went into a Koffiehuis/brasserie for a glass of wine. A group of regulars gathered at the bar placed bets on our nationalities. One man thought we were East Germans and Tina thought we were English. We revealed; money was exchanged. Tina works with an organization called Educational Tours, said the Dutch start learning English early in school and that English is much easier for them than French. German is second after English. Various members of the bar group bought us drinks and we rolled back to Oma’s, sneaking through the shadowy great hall, up the creaky steps to the tower.

Sept. 4

Sat out on a terrasse in Zutphen by the river, me drinking koffie, Fred reading, both of us watching the barges drift by. Even the barges and houseboats looks domestic with lace curtains, potted plants and enormous metal playpens on deck where children played, and adults could sit inside them to supervise. When it rained we popped into Café Bacchus where a horde of blond kids played pool and smoked Camels and Marlboros.

Walburgkirk was a Catholic church before it became Dutch Reform after the Reformation. Statues were removed or smashed, icons whitewashed. Now they are in the process of restoring the statues and removing the limestone whitewash, gradually revealing the paintings which were covered over. It explains the pieces of torsos and traces of robes I saw on pillars. At eye or ladder-level the church was austere, obviously painted over, yet the ceilings were covered with beautiful designs and paintings of Christ and the apostles, done in light curvaceous lines. Battle between Catholicism and Protestantism enacted before my eyes.

Best of all, the 1524 church library. The librarian/theologian/historian spoke English for me and when he found out we're from Canada, he removed his name-plate to reveal a Canadian legion pin. Canadian forces liberated Zutphen and Arnhem . A great medieval church door opened into the library; monastic, austere, highly arches. Hushed catacomb feeling. Dim light filtered through the windows turning soft-white walls into snow. Folky icons carved into pillars and crevices. Their earthy colours added humanity to the austere little room.

The books lie on wooden stalls, chained to iron rods. These books are like great sea chests with wooden covers, intricate clasps and locks. Illuminated manuscripts and incunabula (books printed before Gutenberg invented moveable type). Our guide told us that the scribes who printed the missals commonly abbreviated words, e.g., sanctis=sais. It simply never occurred to me that long-ago scribes also took short-cuts and abbreviated words.

Old narrow places. A cobblestone road leads past cunningly placed shops, the brick church and courtyard. Carnival in the public square – September, of course! Medieval timelessness of the church, evening light slanting across and highlighting a window, a flower box. Children's pony rides next to a very American rocketship ride which, after 8:30. takes you to the Sex Planet. Deep twilight dissolved the red and green of brick and foliage and the white of the phallic rocketship, merging past and present as in sleep.

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Oma is fascinating with her fierce desire to understand and master the world – and her never-ending quest for wisdom. Fred's cousin Carol is right about her never finding serenity, but her turmoil is one of the qualities that make her so fascinating. Her talk can be wearying, especially when she tries to impose her own will and way of doing things on us. I never feel so North American as when she is urging, practically ordering us to map and plan all our peregrinations, telling us what we *should* and *must* see. These are two words Oma uses all the time, words that Carol forbade her to use.

Yet interspersed with all her chatter about maps, statistics and engineering techniques is a shrewd understanding of people, their psychology. There is also something irresistible and seductive about her, some quality that compels me to confide in her the way I won't confide in Carol (who is quite psychologically astute). Oma holds out the promise of intimacy very much the way she holds out and divides money. She uses it to bring people close to her yet does not quite have the confidence in her own charisma. I've learned I can come only so far into her circle before she shuts me out. So I approach her, full of affection but wary, knowing that the closeness I feel with her will only last a moment because in the end I'm not family and not important to her.

She admits to her manipulations, talked about how she plays the role of innocent old woman to her family. She can't leave anything alone, can't bear the thought of something existing beyond her, hence her mania for knowledge. There is a perpetually perplexed expression on her face, the look of someone anxiously trying to understand what can't be categorized or broken down into statements of fact. Sometimes this perplexity clouds into sombreness and sometimes Fred will joust with her, say something that surprised or pleases her. Then her face lightens up and forms a smile of mischievous conspiracy showing that she identifies with the black sheep after all.

She was a plantation owner's daughter and grew up with servants in Indonesia. She married a businessman, CEO of a Phillips (Royal Phillips?) subsidiary based in Barcelona. She has never known anything but wealth and privilege and her viewpoints are rooted in this perspective. Some of her opinions come straight from *Peeps At Many Lands* or any colonial travelogue. She told us that the southern races are quicker, more intelligent than the northern people (never mind that southerners are "races" and northerners are "people"). The northerners know this deep inside and so they study harder. Southerners don't care about school or study because they can rely on their own quick, instinctive intelligence. She does have a deep love and appreciation for Spanish people and culture, extending even to bullfighting. Her house is filled with artifacts from Spain, Indonesia and other "primitive" cultures. She's truly seeking something through her fascination with these cultures. She's always seeking that one piece of knowledge that will complete the lifelong puzzle of her life.

She talked about her life in Spain with her husband, Fred's Opa, who she described as an "excellent man." In fact, all I have ever heard about this man from Oma and Fred's mother is that he was an "excellent man", a "top businessman," etc. I have never heard anything personal about him, no favourite colours, foods, activities, shows – anything. Oma did tell a story about how he brought "one of his workers" a glass of milk, which was something that was "simply not done in Spain." I think Oma probably was progressive in her thoughts on worker-management relations and treatment of the labourers. Yet even this liberalism is steeped in her privilege and colonialism, always the viewpoint of one used to looking down from the upper echelons. There is no black and white here and it's an interesting confrontation for me.

Oma gave us a tour of her house. Its foundations date back to the 1600s, once a farmhouse, renovated by a sculptor. Oma and her husband bought it in 1959 from the sculptor, along with some of the furnishings, including the bawdy little statue over the WC. It was the walled garden that sold her. It would have sold me! The hedge, leaves, rambling ivies tinted it with a blue-green light as if half-submerged; in the middle a battered fountain, its basin filled with fern. Melancholy dreaminess.

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Battle of the burghers? While driving into Deventer I saw one side of a street with mirrorlike windows staring straight ahead while the entire block across the street had their curtains drawn.

Sept. 5

Took Oma's car to Giethoorn, also known as the Netherlands's "Little Venice." This was one of the places Oma urged us to see. Lovely long drive past villages with working windmills and thatched cottages just like Britain. I wondered how sloping roofs of straw could look as if they were rounded and shaped from clay. Saw some roofs being thatched and learned that most thatching is decoration, tradition; the straw is laid on an already existing tiled roof.

Listening to one of several BBC stations we've picked up here. Long daft tale of a woman who lost her brother Graham in a car accident. Graham sported a Mohican-style haircut and all his Mohican-style friends showed up at the funeral causing no end of consternation among the guests. The woman, Graham's sister, was pregnant when Graham was killed. She gave birth and named the baby "Samuel Graham" but called him Sam because calling him Graham would have been too painful. The moral of the story seemed to be that death is inconvenient. "We're simply never ready when it happens." All of this accompanied by syrupy violin music. I record this as slice-of-life. Radio here is so interesting.

Giethoorn itself is a charming network of canals and islands linked by bridges, capped by show houses with thatched roofs. I am fascinated by how the land is broken up, defined by water, so close to being submerged. Size became illusory and I could have sworn I was walking through a miniature village. I felt like a giant towering over the bridges, houses and paths, although everything was normal size. I didn't think it resembled Venice, in spite of the canals and bridges, but was a quintessential part of the Netherlands, even more consciously designed, arranged and engineered than the country as a whole, a microcosm in which everything picturesque about the Dutch countryside is brought together. Thatched houses, lush gardens, bridges, canals, punts. Maybe that's why I kept feeling I was actually in a miniature village. We rented a boat and had a lovely tourist morning exploring canals and lagoons, trying to keep from colliding with other tourist boats.

I imagined myself on a punt in Indonesia, slinking through jungles and swamps, peering up at the sides of huts through shimmering foliage. Surprised by how often this pretty, domestic country has evoked the jungle, the "other" Indonesian world for me. I'm guessing a lot of it has to do with Oma's stories and influence.

I love the presence of water in this country, the way slots cut through the fields. Many are green with algae. Fred once ran across a field and was shocked when he dropped into a slot. Much of the reclaimed land is actually below sea level, fields turned in at the ditches like waterbed mattresses.

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Took Oma's car on a joy-ride, sneaking through Sneek, looping up and picnicking on the Afsluitdijk before wending our way down to Elburg, another place on Oma's itinerary. Sneek was particularly interesting as it was a side of the Netherlands that I hadn't yet seen, a northern industrial port city, reminiscent of Liverpool or Hamburg. Buildings tougher and more rundown. Sneek also in the midst of a fall fair; a jumble of pedestrians, bicycles and cars in the square, operatic music booming out of speakers sitting in a little wagon. Biker gangs, leather women and sea captains roamed the streets. A merry-go-round ground out a vehemently mournful old tune. No Disney characters here. The horses on the merry-go-round are definitely European, rearing steeds menacing heaven with their gaping jaws and mad eyes.

Breathtaking picnic on the Afsluitdijk. Lines and planes, horizontal vision, Mondrian abstraction of North Sea and this narrow strip of land. We sat overlooking the sea, alone in this immensity, distant ships barely distinguishable from the clouds. Thought of the Flying Dutchman, a spectral ship seen in stormy weather off the Cape of Good Hope and considered an omen among sailors. Originally a vessel laden with precious metals, a murder was committed on board. The plague broke out among the crew and no port would allow the vessel to enter. The ill-fated ship still wanders, a ghost doomed to remain at sea and never to alight and rest on shore.

From the dyke it was a dream of sea, an immense calm, silent and immutable, the horizon a line of unearthly fineness, a hairline crack in the shell of the world. No sound except for the wind, no movement except for the ghostly ships, the sky a place as pale and still as the phantom sea. Limitless vision.

Made our way to Elburg through Flevoland, a dream-drive in rain and gloom. The fields which in daylight had seemed so geometric turned grey and unknowable, indistinguishable from sea and sky. Modern windmills stood like lonely outposts, blades revolving.

There must be sea stories, legends and plenty of phantoms lurking in this transformed geography. At night, in the rain, the land itself has transformed into the sea, unbroken by domesticity of houses and commuter trains and bike paths and our car became a punt. Rain sheeted the windshield. The sea washing away all that is knowable and domestic, washing away all the links, connections and closeness of communities to each other. Everything we had come to think of as being “the Netherlands” has vanished and Oma is an ocean away.

Elburg by night taken over by the boating communities and students. Another medieval town enclosed by castle walls that belong to the tourists by day and the sea at night.

Sept. 6

Utrecht. Achterstraat (Second Back Lane!), a lane straight out of a children’s story; cobblestone, black lamp-posts, walls, profusion of flowers. Church bells. Sunlight finally appears, opening the stone eyes of saints, queens, kings and all the stone populace of Utrecht, including the beautiful statue of Anne Frank, standing so simply outside the church. Ancient houses with wooden galleries like battered ships slant down to the canal. Le Dome Cathedral shimmered, a vision superimposed over the old buildings and statues, a vision encompassing past and future. Almost like science fiction, a Batman or *Blade Runner* set design, an imagined futuristic edifice in the middle of a medieval European city. Delicacy of line in detail made it waver, mirage-like, over the brick solidity of the buildings around it. Portal to an alternate universe in plain sight.

So many crypts. Sarcophagi of princes, dukes, barons, privileged pillars of society. A life-sized statue laid out on a coffin lid, dressed for all eternity in yellow marble. Church filled with coffins, busts, crowns, weeping lions, lambs pulling crosses and flags. Crosses spilling from horns of plenty across grapes, apples and wheat sheaves. Ornate crypts, sunken alcoves where dead princes had been put away in splendour. Effigies lay on polished graves, face up in marble among floating crowns and cherubim in wreathes of flower and fruit. Walled “paradise garden” closed promptly at 5:00. A very punctual country.

Toured a smaller church. Some Utrecht University students made our group fun and lively. Climbed down a narrow ladder into a crypt. *Memento mori* – the original death’s heads and batwing imagery before heavy metal bands picked it up. Gothic imagination and preoccupation with death continues. The Phantom of the Opera crashed sown on the organ when the tour leader spoke. No problem taking photos – or smoking in this particular church. A lot of whitewash must have been sold during the Reformation – must have been a big industry at the time. Repercussions of the Reformation continue through the renovation going on now to restore the vandalized icons. I look down and discover what I had been stumbling over were raised letters on gravestones embedded in the floor! Secrets, hidden places. So fascinating to me.

Statues. Look up, way up at the stone figures rising from the edges of roofs into the sky. They follow me with their breastplates reared to the pale light. They watch me from balustrades in the windy shifting sky where they tower half-draped, half-nude, helmeted, armed, forever ready to hurl their lances at some form of enemy. Lined up furiously along the edge of the roof for some sinister drill. Not all of them might be stone. One might be alive – but which one?

Mysterious boulevards at dusk, ancient crooked houses with their charms and carved medallions above the entrances. Mild wind, a square turning into a misty lake. Moon rolling across the gables and a golden weather-cock pecked at small stars. Small red sun sinking behind roofs and in the deep blue dusk windows slowly lit up, golden glow joining house to house. Rising moon filled the streets with snowy light, revealing carvings, medallions with cameos above the doors. Silver faces of the medallions slowly coming to life. We went to find what looked like an ancient Norman battlement, a single rampart sprouted science-fiction-like out of nowhere. Turned out to be a water tower!

Eventually I was brought back to urban reality. I may have seen a crackhouse, a gang of guys banging on the door of a yellow house with a slot in the door, Shopping centre-train station was sleazy with people making open drug transactions. No police or security in sight. We read, waiting for the train, mostly surrounded by students.

Sept. 8

Eefde. Perfect autumn day. Fred and I walked to the slouse, watched the boom raised and lowered, the boats slipping through. Then we pulled a Maigret and popped into the Café Slouse for a glass of Oranjeboom beer. Homey, intimate atmosphere, regulars clustered at the bar, young students playing cards at the table. The Dutch seem to create homes wherever they go. A black man speaking half-Dutch half-English (like Fred) talked about how he didn't know why he was called black, because his skin is actually brown and white people spend fortunes to get their skin brown like his. The dutchman beside him joked that he was a lot easier to see in the snow. Fun bar conversation in two-ish languages.

Later Oma took us out to a chic Chinese restaurant, which reminded me of an aquarium. Later still, I floated off to James Brown's "Soul of a Black Man" on Radio Luxembourg.

Sept. 9

On a great Hitchcock train with berths, doors that can bang open and shut, compartments like those in *the 39 Steps*. All it lacked was the piercing whistle and clouds of steam. Easy to imagine a cast of characters; Scotland Yard inspectors and fugitives leap-frogging from compartment to compartment, rushing down the narrow aisles, spies lowering their heads into newspapers, pulling up the collars on their trench coats, chained to attaché cases, the doomed White Russian countess with the lost diamond and the deadly secret exiled in our berth while a body drops to a floor, bloody knife buried in his back. Lights flicker, blinds are raised and lowered signalling to accomplices hidden all over the train, while Maigret clenches his pipe in his teeth.

Heading into Amsterdam. Houseboats, mobile homes on barges, rough-hewn tall ships. Boats of every description. On one side of the tracks a grand old turreted building. On the other side a North American style glass crypt, probably a bank. I am a little baffled by the stickers on these trains, a pictogram which seems to be instructing passengers not to throw bottles out the window. The Dutch have a problem with this?

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More churches, again whitewashed, all the brightly painted saints and apostles removed long ago but fragments appearing again on the walls as part of the restoration process, robes and faces appearing as if by a magic animator's paintbox. The Freudian writing pad where the transparency is lifted up to reveal the archaic that has been there, concealed, the entire time. Found ourselves in an alley so narrow it might have been a covered bridge, roofs of the houses on either side all but joined above our heads in one jumble of flower boxes, lopsided chimneys, clotheslines and eaves. A satellite dish stood one-legged in the midst of the jumble. Shop windows full of the clutter of silent fiddles, empty birdcages, wooden dolls, tailor's dummies hung with stiff uniforms or yellowed cobwebby wedding gowns but best of all, the old clocks.

Amsterdam is an intriguing melange of things that are recognizable but with a twist. And such a diversity of people. Walked through a park and saw gay lovers, people of all colours, homeless people with their own territories all staked out, pillows and blankets marking their spots. Even the homeless makes homes here. Old shuttered building with a fuchsia and white polka dotted roof with an anarchist symbol painted on the wall, a John Cage-like band creating a great clamour.

Found a Bed & Breakfast on the very same street where we were parked. This B&B, with only two guest rooms, runs out of the home of two elderly hat-makers. Two sweet men with a pampered white cat and big rooms full of hats of every description. They proudly told us that there are few hat-makers in the Netherlands and the royal family often wears their hats. Standard European room with two small beds, open window with no screens, a tiny bathroom cubicle outside the room and a fold-out shower in our bedroom.

Steep twisted staircase with shallow steps led to the room and it felt like climbing into a farmhouse attic. More hats upstairs, a whole room filled with hats. Saw the sewing room. The hatters took our passports and were pleased to discover Fred's a Dutch-Canadian. One of them said the name sounded familiar and he knew of Van Driels in Rotterdam. These lovely gentle men sat together at their large table, shared a bottle of red wine and wrote us out a receipt we could keep as a souvenir!

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The narrow houses have hooks at roof level and the only way of moving furniture in and out is to tie ropes around the furniture and raise the pieces up into the windows. A young woman attached a rope to a table and I watched as it rose and dangled precariously in mid-air. Older people like Oma and our hatters have such massive pieces of furniture it's no wonder they seldom move. Fred said he could remember seeing his grandparents raise a piano up to their apartment window in Barcelona. (He was there as a young child.) The houses here are tall and narrow because housing prices were determined by their width. Saw the smallest house in Amsterdam, wedged between two others not much wider, and heard the story behind it.

A boss once heard an employee complain about working conditions. The employee said he would be a happy man if only he had a house no wider than his boss's doorway. So the employer did just that – built him a house no wider than his own doorway. So much for labour-management relations – and people wonder why there are unions.

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Visited the Anne Frankhuis. Otto Frank's former employees helped him and his family hide from the Nazis in 1942 by creating a hiding place in the empty annex. Two houses were often built one behind the other: one in front with a courtyard in between and an annex. Anne Frank's annex consisted of the two upper floors and attic of the building with an entrance hidden behind a hinged bookcase. Otto Frank's business was in herbs and spices and since the supply of herbs for the house in front had to be stored in the dark, the windows were blacked out and painted over. All the windows in occupied Amsterdam were blacked out in the evenings by black slats.

In spite of the crowd also touring the house it was still an incredibly moving experience. It's a Wonderland house of impossibly small steep curving staircases and low ceilings. Some of the objects were especially poignant; the little map on the wall marking the progress of the war, Anne's collection of movie stars and newspaper clippings. As one of the visitors said, "She must have been a wonderful child." Also interesting to see her diaries, the actual pages filled with her flowing script.

It's been a long time since I read the Diary but it was the first book I ever read where the protagonist/writer, the "I" of the story died. I had so expected her to come through the war because that voice was too alive to do otherwise. Even when I finished reading the diary I still couldn't believe she had been killed, so close to the Liberation. It was devastating. Still is.

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Red Light District more a tourist attraction than anything else. The addicts and prostitutes were so much what one expects them to be they looked like actors in period costume. Of course the tourist industry capitalizes on it with Red Light District postcards, t-shirts and bumper sticker such as "Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go to Amsterdam." Addicts kept approaching Fred (a lean man with deep-set eyes) offering him heroin, coke, speed and "very good" opium. I get the feeling the Dutch government has actually been very capitalistically clever by legalizing drugs and prostitution and unleashing tourist crowds into the area. Do they charge admission to mafia hangouts as well? This is a place that posts signs saying "No Photos" on the prostitutes' cubicles. Tourists promenaded through the area, sheltered in their bubbles, looking but not involved, almost like holographs.

Most bizarre are the prostitutes in the shop windows. Little red lanterns line the lanes where women sit in windows dressed in garter belts, bustières, bathing suits. Mirrors are mounted on ceilings. Usually the women are facing the street or gazing at themselves in the mirror, applying makeup, touching up the merchandise. Mirrors, picture windows, canals; a country of reflections. When a prostitute lures someone into her cubicle the curtains are drawn. These women looked plump, older, well taken care of, whereas the ones working the streets were thin and haggard, most likely young addicts.

You can play around a lot with images of houses, housekeeping, parodies of the little woman at home waiting for her man, the connection between home, wife and prostitution made explicit. Also, of course, the selling of women in shop windows as just another commodity, the co-opting of prostitution into the mainstream, removing it from any antisocial context. Here the prostitutes do not even pose a threat to the notion of home and family and are only a commodity among other commodities. I could also go further and link the women with pet shops; exotic animals placed in display cases by savvy colonialists.

We turned a corner and I glimpsed a woman standing topless in a building called “Thai World” and she was beautiful and trapped and I gasped. Just around that corner was the Christian Youth Hostel and in the midst of red lanterns, sex museums and sadomasochism funhouses (featuring B & D) was a Salvation Army service, people standing in stiff uniforms and singing hymns.

I’m glad we ventured outside the Red Light District to the core of the inner city, the real urban section that is supposed to remain unseen, concealed by the Red Light dog and pony show. Here, graffiti everywhere, litter, grilled windows, kids batting balls against the windows of a housing project. We went into the metro to have a look. A drunken woman had broken her wine bottle and three black cops swarmed her, made her pick up the pieces and throw them in the garbage and then escorted her out of the metro. She cursed them out and staggered into a nearby snack bar.

We were tired and thirsty and stopped for a drink in a café/bar that resembled the Blue Angel. Two large tough women danced together. Mix of country and reggae music. I enjoyed both Hank Williams and “Tomorrow People.” Back outside, a leatherman working the streets. Many bag ladies. “Polyclinic” for drug addicts, a dim corridor with stiff wooden chairs and a huge ashtray right at one of the canals. In Montréal Fred is often offered “hâche.” Here it’s heroin.

Sept. 10

Lovely breakfast laid out for us by the Mad Hatters. They brought in a little silver coffee pot and placed it on a mini-samovar. Hats everywhere in the elegant, high-ceilinged, antique-filled house. They made us a receipt so we could “keep it for the memories.” One of the gentlemen flapped a bit over all the little things he had to do, including taking the big fluffy cat to the vet. They let us stow our luggage at the B & B while we went on a canal cruise and to the Van Gogh museum. They even gave us apples for the road. Lovely, lovely men.

Boat cruise was a great way to see Amsterdam, slinking down back canals, out to the harbour especially since it was pouring rain. The captain pointed at places of interest, and spoke in Dutch, English, German and a little French. He pointed out Mata Hari’s Amsterdam house. I nudged Fred and said, “We’ll have to tell Gail and Ravil.” Our guide smiled at me and said, “You like the spies, yes?” Indeed! There was a stork standing one-legged, head tucked into its wing on the roof of a houseboat. For some reason I really wanted to see storks. Clearly the most popular stop on our tour was the Cat Boat, which is a houseboat populated by old, sick or stray cats. Cats were prowling on deck, curled up in baskets. Everyone crowded out to the deck to see them and the guide pulled in close, chuckling the whole time. He knows his clientele!

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Rijksmuseum closed but Van Gogh museum open. Disappointed that *Starry Night* was not part of the collection but was amazed by some earlier dark paintings I hadn’t seen before. Lonely buildings against an oceanic sky revealed only by storm-light. The buildings are alone but also merging with the gathering storm. The rusts and oranges of the autumn paintings, tall slender trees, path leading into the heart of this autumn day and into the feelings autumn days evoke. Even his most vivid colours contain darkness. Darkness lies at the heart of his golds and oranges. He captures the edge of emotion, the line or front of change, clouds as they have gathered to a point where there is turning back and are just one breath from the storm. Paintings such as the Potato-Eaters show his intense feeling for the poor and I learned he was once a lay preacher among impoverished coal miners.

Fascinated by the energy of his brushstrokes, the turbulence of line and shape, and the way some paintings appear to be stitched together. In a painting of hayfields, the golds are hypnotic and seem to grow brighter the longer you look at it. Upstairs was devoted to the letters he wrote to his brother, wonderful letters that described his art in progress, choices of colour and the meanings he attached to them. He also included sketches of work-in-progress. His brother must have truly been a kindred spirit to receive such letter.

An Emile Bernard exhibition on at the same time. Such a contrast to Van Gogh. Blues, pinks, purples, magentas. Fluid shapes, curved and soft but powerful the way Eskimo carvings are. His colours are so thoroughly blended you can barely make out individual strokes at all.

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On the road again, to Fred's mother's "cottage" in Domburg. Radio stations are interesting, surprising as they are not polarized into AOR categories. On one station you can hear Technotronic and Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" back-to-back. Steve Miller's "The Joker" is very popular. Souka music, John Denver, Abba, "Paloma Blanca," and "Sandy" the Hollies version I loved so much in high school. "Tom's Diner" all over the airwaves but it does seem like a perfect European café song with just a hint of existential angst.

Stopped at a little fishing village, Hellesvoetsluis, hoping to find a restaurant or at the very least a cup of coffee. The whole town was closed. Nothing is more desolate than a little village of tiled roofs and small brick houses all closed up. We saw one restaurant door open and we almost didn't bother investigating. But we did and had a wonderful meal, seafood melange and salmon, possibly the best we've had this trip. We watched as three businessmen received a platter of raw meats and stone tablets on their plates. They placed the meat on the slabs for about fifteen seconds, then turned them over. We've never even seen this at L'Hotellerie and everyone in the restaurant watched them eat their dinner.

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Arrived at Domburg, a touristy beach town. The “cottage” Fred mentioned is a two story house albeit not winterized and full of cottage kitsch. Oma rents it out to summer families and because it’s September it was available for us. Needless to say I teased him mercilessly about his cottage. “Where’s the main house” and so on. Fred then took me for a walk up the hill that led to the beach and I don’t think I have ever been on a more beautiful magical walk in my life. I was awestruck. Dark woods with “Mayan steps” leading to the dunes where a mysterious Tarot tower loomed over sycamore trees and swirling light-streaked El Greco sky, a “Paperhouse” on top of the hill. Looking down from the dunes to the North Sea the waves endlessly rolling in and out, the luminous strip of beach where earth, sea and sky meet. All in trembling half-light. One of the most wonderful moments in my life.

Sept. 11

Found a place that makes poofertjes, half donut, half pancake confections with butter and icing sugar. Not usually my thing, but these are delicious. Fred loved them when he was a kid and would always ask for money so he could go off and get some. Domburg resembles St-Sauveur in that it is charming and tourist-driven but not as commercial or developed. It doesn’t resemble the commercial resort towns I’ve seen elsewhere and I wonder if there are controls on development here. Orange-tiled town, water tower, windmill and church spire – a real place.

Explored Middelburg in evening light. Germanic city hall with animal totems such as the golden lamb, roebuck and trout. More effigies of past kings, princes; a mythological procession of figures deep within their niches, sharing cramped quarters with pigeons. Lovely town full of churches, made of brick of all different shades of red and brown, alleyways, secret passages that made me feel like I was playing hide and seek. A maze of a town and we could literally lead each other up the garden path. Dusk on a cobblestoned street, faint violin music coming from shuttered windows, bats flickering up and down the street. Found another friendly pub, more poofertjes. The waitress asked us about Canada and if we liked Holland. I am ready to move here.

Night walk to the Domburg beach. This time the Mayan steps and Enchanted Forest and the Tower illuminated in moonlight. Comets streaked by. Galileo, Copernicus, ancient telescopes, stargazers creating celestial alphabets.

Sept. 12

Back to the mazes of Middelburg. Network of paths, laneways bordered by brick walls. The sound of our footsteps ringing, echoing, quick flash to how jackboots must have sounded on the cobblestones. War memorials and graves in the countryside between Domburg and Middelburg. Bunkers in the hayfields. Wandered into the courtyard of a music school where we could hear piano and violin scales from open windows. The school had the sequestered look of an old monasteries. Shutters painted red and white like so many others in the area. Must be the Walcheren provincial colours.

Sept. 13

Domburg to Rouen. Ferry from Vlissingen to Belgium. Entered Belgium on a misty day, slender trees bent backward in the wind. Hazy dreamlike day, grass and trees an eerie shade of green. Belgium is a real transition region between the Netherlands and France. More closed-in and self-contained than my sense of the NL. We passed the same kind of tidy houses yet many with a touch of wildness, a little more wear, something that made me aware of crossing the border into another country. Some houses had little shrines in their yards, icons on walls which looked older and more rough-hewn than the Dutch.

The surprise and shock of Bruges. We only stopped for a while but its elegance was overwhelming. Very closed-in feeling, as if the entire city was a cathedral. Strong lines, stylized designs, gargoyles watching from every entrance. Silhouettes of turrets, chimneys, gables, terraces, weathervanes and roofs. Intensity and seclusion. Streets zigzag, seemingly cut to fit around the great cathedrals. These streets are as narrow and treacherous as mountain passes, walls rising as steeply as rock-face.

What would happen if weather-cocks shrieked in human voices, doors banged open and shut against walls, stone wolves came to life and loped, howling down the stone corridors. Large carousel in the public square made me think this was a real Pinocchio city, one that could be severe and foreboding. I could imagine Pinocchio and his friend Lampwick transformed into donkeys because they were bad at their lessons.

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France! First sight, a boat for England, always boats heading to Dover. Oceanic journey, hills advancing and receding like waves, impressions, reveries. Countryside drier and scrubbier than anywhere in the NL, trees beginning to change colour, burnished leaves, rust, wood smoke, scrub fires. Drove along coast to Dunkerque, beach and dunes. Quite built up all along the coast, condos, construction cranes everywhere as if the weight could tilt the entire country into the sea. More like North America in its construction and advertising than the NL. Definitely a forlorn off-season feel, holiday people gone, white sand drifting in wind, seasonal buildings shuttered and barred. Buildings the same shade of white as the sand.

We stopped, hoping to see a war memorial or museum but didn't find any. The entire place has been taken over by beach. Difficult to feel the presence of war, almost impossible to imagine its occurrence. Really sad to see, in Dunkerque of all places, pro le Pen graffiti. Le Pen's presence is all over France and his followers seem to be as fervent as all those protestants who white-washed the cathedrals in the NL.

France is much larger than the NL, less neat and compact and the countryside feels vast in comparison. Felt like we had hit the open road, or that we had come out of a canal into open water. Also a Wild West feeling with huge trucks sharing the road, low buildings built into the ground so it looks as if they're melting into earth. Innumerable café-brasseries resembling saloons. No surprise that the French are fascinated by the American frontier and cowboy outlaws. The kinship is There. Here, though, it's a wild west haunted by the ghost of the Roman Empire for I could see at any time, remains of bridges, aqueducts, villas, bunkers and churches half-buried in the grass, like a Surrealist game of symbols.

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Swooping down the stone lanes into Rouen was like swooping through time itself. Tall spectral buildings sloped down the hill past the monument of Jeanne d'Arc. We found The Hotel Sphinx; tall, white, gabled roof, tall window and shutters, elegant wrought iron balcony. It was run by a sweet Arabic man and was amazingly inexpensive. Climbed three flights of narrow twisting stairs to an attic of crooked beams, tilting floor and a window looking out over all the rooftops of Rouen. Dark rough-hewn beams I associate with Tudor England. I never realized they are crooked and slant at cockeyed angles. I had to pad up and down the stairs to go to the bathroom and every time I paused at the window I gasped, unable to believe I could really be in this place, cathedral spire glowing in the soft night, pigeons throbbing in the rafters

Sept. 14

Rouen to Paris. Rouen cathedral by day looks less substantial than it does glowing at night. Archaeological dig in the middle of a street. In Montréal it would be an open construction pit. Here it is a historical excavation. More street scenes this morning than I had witnessed during our entire stay in the NL. Interchanges between proprietors and customers at one of the fruit and vegetable stands which are everywhere. A postie making her rounds, slipping seductive bundles into impossibly narrow slots into impenetrable buildings. I took a last look at our hotel, thrilled I was able to stay in the small room on the top floor, with the crooked windows, small beds and bedrolls. I love venturing up long steep stairways, feeling my way down labyrinthine hallways. It makes me feel I'm really on an adventure - in Europe.

After checking in we went on a quest for food, which in France, is never far away. Found a place down the street, in the upper storey of a drugstore. Inside, dark wood, soft lights. A man sat at a table, completely absorbed in *Le Monde*. A woman came in with her little dog and the two started talking. This rather formidable looking man-of-the-world made a great fuss over the dog and even lapsed into mushy doggie-talk. Our waiter was very courteous – and he looked like Marc Le May.

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Masonry, woodwork, the smell of mossy water, old fountains with lion's heads, more woodsmoke. For an hour or so we were in countryside, villages few and far between. After that all roads led to Paris, the entire country tilted, traffic from Belgium, Germany, the NL, Britain pressing toward Paris. The drivers are more demanding, exhibitionistic and opportunistic and Fred's Montréal driving style fit in better here than in the NL. We ended up becoming part of the infamous Paris rush hour and it really felt as if Paris in the hub of the continent. Everyone had led us to expect rude insulting Parisiens but we came in contact with friendly helpful people. We quickly found an inexpensive hotel in the north section of Montmartre and the proprietor was very friendly and helpful. We talked about Simenon and he told us there's a new statue honouring him on the boulevard Richard-Lenoir. As there should be!

The first thing we did was go check out the Eiffel Tower. That area of the city was magnificent. I was overwhelmed by the famous traffic circle around l'Arc de Triomphe. How do directors manage to get these romantic views of the tower? How do they manage to still the sheer perpetual motion of this restless city for a moment?

Aware of the presence of black people, women dressed in beautiful bright patterns, men wearing Africa t-shirts and pendants. It was worth being stuffed into the elevator with a crowd of tourists to get to the summit of the tower, just to see that view of Paris, a vision of moonlit roofs, blue of the Seine, towers, cathedrals, palaces, parks and cafés shimmering on the water like a city created by magicians. On the quais the buildings reflect light from the water, wavering, turning into liquid themselves. l'Arc de Triomphe impressive in its strength, its look of history, illuminated by golden floodlights. From the top of the tower, the city is made up of clusters of low buildings which seem to form nodes, streets radiating outward from the centre, the grey-tan stone which turns gold in the late sun, mansard roofs against the twilight sky, the Basilica of Sacre Coeur in the distance.

There were certainly some chic people in Paris, but again, not the clichés I had expected. Many, maybe most of the people I saw looked like country people, people going to and from farmers' markets, reminding me of the rural roots and also how close those walled villages are to the city. Because we walked to all the touristy sites tonight I saw the most magisterial buildings, monuments to their own selves. Dictator buildings with iron balconies created for speeches and the appearance of Marie Antoinette on the Faubourg St-Honoré. So many replicas of these buildings and squares exist in cities around the world, especially Latin America. Feel like I am standing at the source, the origin of so much architecture and city planning that can be seen in the world.

I did love the Champs Élysée and I walked between tall slender trees and lamp posts, leaves changing colour and falling to my feet. The walkway is sand, not grass, and that adds to the haze of the city. It becomes spectral at night and our wanderings became moon walks. I had to stop several times, unable to believe I was really here, walking on my own feet through the Champs Élysée, seeing and sensing, touching, smelling, actually part of the city, no longer gazing at photos and paintings yearning to step into them.

Place de la Concorde after dark, with its lights and surrounded by streaming cars, resembled a launchpad, preparing to send its obelisk into orbit. That obelisk in 3,300 years old, from the temple of Luxor, a gift from an Egyptian viceroy and not the colonialist plunder I had suspected. Excellent dinner with a friendly waiter, once again surprised by how down-to-earth so many of the people seemed.

I loved the eerie twining vine Art Nouveau Métro entrances which made me feel I was entering a swamp. Tuileries sculpture garden inhabited by Maillot's female nudes. Across the road stand their dance partners, four male Rodin nudes. Edging ponds and paths and twinkling through the chestnut trees are the garden's gods, goddesses, beasts and urns of antiquity.

We headed back to the Métro and were treated to some kind of breakdown. After these many years in Montréal, we felt very much at home. Chaos of barred entrances, closed lines and hundreds of stranded tourists. One line was running to Strasbourg/St-Denis and our station at Clignotant was open. We didn't have to pay; no one was staffing any of the booths.

I really enjoyed the Métro, though. It really is the Underground City I've heard so much about. Métro musicians played African music. I saw some clochards sleeping on the benches. Many stations have a museum,-like feeling to them with advertisements surrounded by gilt frames. Tiled walls curved around the tracks and people ate, drank, smoked, played musical instruments. In the Netherlands I often sensed people staring at me when whenever I sat somewhere by myself to read. In Paris I was always coming across people huddled in corners, reading with great concentration. Back at the hotel I flung the window open to hear the sounds of the street, cafés, markets, "drogueries" just below us.

Sept. 15

Early morning walk. This is quite a poor neighbourhood. Discovered a home for unwed mothers on my ramblings, a nurse dressed in businesslike blue leaving the premises. Also a nearby men's shelter. People with young children and (of course) dogs already gathered in the park. Went to Les Halles de Montmartre where I was lured into buying a huge chocolate meringue, which proved to be way too much for me.

Tumult of Les Halles, countless stands selling everything imaginable. A Le Pen rally was going on; the thin, sharp-featured fascists distributing the pamphlets were dressed just like Jehovah's Witnesses. In fact just a little farther down the street the Bible Society had a booth and their reps smiled, gave out their leaflets and looked just like the Le Pen minions. A woman who looked like she had just come in from a village accepted a Le Pen brochure and started speaking passionately to the fascist. I was struck by how evangelical and well-organized the fascist group was. Like the US, France seems to be split between left and right and both sometimes give the impression they could fall open, like a broken-backed book.

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Return to the centre of Paris. Bookstores! Passed the Gilbert academic bookstores which were jammed with students. Crowd of students in a churchyard selling their used textbooks by waving them in the air and shouting what they had. A chaotic auction. More initiation rites; students covered in paint.

Then on to the iconic Shakespeare & Company. It is a charming, vast bookstore, more a tourist attraction now than a Left Bank bookstore. It is a good bookstore though and there was the famous sign and its Gallic portrait of Shakespeare. A portrait of Walt Whitman presided over the outdoor bargain shelves. Someone was napping in the comfy chair by the shelves. I spent ages browsing through issues of *The Paris Free Voice*, wishing I could have seen it when Sylvia Beach was the proprietor and James Joyce came to visit.

Walked along the Seine. Timelessness of the arched bridges lulled me into forgetting traffic tumult. Passed bookstalls with erotic books wrapped in cellophane, pornographic postcards, rare books, map prints and collectors' comics. Spent some time in a café, softly lit room with a window opening on a grey slate roof. The haze of the city serves as a deflector, diffuser of light. The light here is vast and intense, like the light gathered by a film projector, as if all these buildings appeared out of the light, on screen. Indeed the City of Light!

A Utrillo house, unsteady on its foundations, small windows with worn shutters. Such a mixture of the grand and homely here. Wonderful gargoyles, and women's faces everywhere, peering from every lamp post and facade, from the stern conquering Minerva/Marianne to the muses climbing vinelike up the walls, the city is haunted by the presence of women. Barges on the Seine very long and flat, used to transport coal, bricks and wood. The Seine glitters with boats, fountains play, galleries and bookstores are crowded, signs advertise "Astrologie Cours," gardens filled with women and children. And then turned a corner into Place Colette. So much history and art.

Sept. 16

Spent most of the day in the Louvre. Eventually we hunted down the Mona Lisa, as did hundreds of other tourists. It's a small painting, entombed in plexiglass, surrounded by crowds and camera flashes. I posed in front of a huge painting of Napoleon. The Delacroixes and Davids were gigantic leaving us to wonder where and how they were painting, how many people it took to lift them. These were all narratives of the French Revolution, painted in dramatic blacks, browns, blood-reds, full of fearless leaders and Marianne leading her people to liberty.

I wandered through the sculpture rooms seeing figures from art history books with my own eyes. That strange sense of familiarity I've been feeling since I entered France. The Louvre is a palace, ripe with intrigue, simmering with passion and conspiracy. The rooms unfold like the halls of a labyrinth. Motes dancing in the light. A ghoulish room filled with Roman heads mounted on posts as if the fruit of a recent purge. Spent the rest of the afternoon roaming around Montmartre. Saw the Folies Bergère, a cool square Art Nouveau building. Or is it Art Deco?

Finally left Paris. Stopped for supper at a roadside auberge, a delightfully gloomy French farmhouse with stone foundations. Chill, rainy night, room filling with shadow, green flowered wallpaper, flickering lamplight. Our server was a very nice woman, anxious to please, moving gingerly, probably suffering from arthritis, yet carrying big dinner plates and smiling through her pain. We asked for a glass of wine each and received the standard half-litre jug. "But only one glass – that's not enough," she said. Holy Maigret in the Vendée!

We weren't able to spend the night at that wonderful old auberge but found a nice hotel on the highway. Restful pastel colours, a real bed with pillows and big deep bathtub. Welcome combination of European style with American conveniences. First modern hotel we've stayed at on our journey.

Sept. 17

Lunéville, somewhere between Nancy and Strasbourg. One of those smaller places like Deventer or Middelburgh we find so charming and can somehow while away so much time in. Colours, salmon pink and cream buildings, bright red flower boxes, red pathway leading along a river with its own timeless arched bridge. A tropical feeling in a town so close to the German border. I can only imagine what the south of France is like. Collage of tinted walls. Colour, shape and texture, wash of peach pierced by the rust of a railing. Got a fabulous short haircut from a friendly stylist. May be the best cut I've ever had.

Detoured off the highway into a camouflage-brown farming village, Gogney. Wood and stone faded and chiseled into soapstone greys. Scarlet-tipped ivy covered walls, rust-coloured chickens, brown bulls. Creeping down gravel roads made me think of Maigret again, facing the laconic villagers covering up the secret they all know. Buildings sprouting like mushroom from the earth, earth colours, joined by the highways. Palimpsests of signs on barns, café walls, shops; overlays torn, peeled revealing fragments of older letters. The closer we came to Strasbourg the more we started seeing German names. The accents were thicker, more Germanic, more difficult for me to understand. EEC (European Economic Community) flags appearing in abundance. Circle of thirteen gold stars on a blue background. Interesting I should only start seeing these flags now. I get the impression that Germany is one of the driving forces behind this organization.

Heavy Germanic influence. Operatic balconies, heavily decorated iron work. A dark portentous gloom to many of the buildings, although the colours are still lovely and tropical. Surprised by the sharp distinctions between the regions, a much more diverse country than the tiny Netherlands and I wonder how the EEC is going to unify the differences between regions much less nations.

Like Belgium, Strasbourg is a transition area. Restaurants a blend of French and German, inviting French terrasse juxtaposed with German heraldic figures, falcon totems, shutters painted with crests. French balconies with German formality. Invitation vs stateliness. There was a convention in town so we had to go to Wolfisheim to find food and lodging. Only three km from Strasbourg and with a name that couldn't be more Germanic, I felt we were pulled right back into France. We found the Hôtel/Restaurant Henriette, run by country people. Our room was an old farmhouse room, musty and full of atmosphere with a large cabinet, ornate maroon wallpaper, saggy bed and bedroll, small lamps and items you would expect to find in a farmhouse.

Walked through town. Everything closed, shuttered up tight. I heard voices through the walls, through the wooden slats. I must have triggered every dog in the neighbourhood when I ventured down an alleyway. I felt like a stranger, out after curfew, trying to make my way back, every movement under surveillance although I couldn't see a living soul; only voices behind shutters. The long main street was empty, only the occasional truck roaring through to Strasbourg.

We ventured into the restaurant where a group of regulars sat drinking their red wine, all watching a “Stars 90” show on TV. They looked like legionnaires. A tiny hunch-backed woman served us. It was a fixed menu and we did not know what we were going to be served nor how much it would cost. Each course ended when the woman suddenly appeared with new plates. Main course turned out to be a turkey leg and mashed potato. Another silent woman limped over to the table to watch TV. This group seemed to be members of the same family. They ate separately and it was the same dinner we received.

At first I felt obtrusive and uncomfortable as we were the only two people in the room who were outsiders but the TV united everyone. They always say TV alienates people but this time it seemed to bring everyone together in this large, dim, creaky room full of Balzac characters. I heard The Christians perform a haunting song. A comedian did a manic impression of Mitterrand, which made everyone in the room laugh. Even the silent woman smiled and clapped her hands. French ads are stylish and visual.

My favourite ad featured a James Dean-type rebel who drove his motorcycle into Wall Street, disrupting all the traders and brokers. He revs up to a woman, slaps a pair of jeans on her desk. She whips off her stock-broker glasses and jumps onto the back of his motorcycle and they drive off into the sun all to Steve Miller’s “The Joker.” Good fun.

Sept. 16

Headed back into Strasbourg and ended up staying most of the day. Saw a demonstration of an old astronomical clock at the cathedral. The original clock was built in the 1300s. It broke down and a new one was built in the 1700s. This one broke down and was left alone until one man took an interest in the clock, restored the original facade and rebuilt the mechanism. A calendar plaque showed the signs of the zodiac. A fussy officious churchman herded everyone into the cathedral, imploring people to go to the back but no one paid any attention to him. We could hardly hear the story of the clock, told in French, English and German, over this silly man’s disorderly obsession with order.

Fun crowd-babble, squabbles breaking out between all sorts of people in various languages. A British voice: "There's no order here at all!" A French couple was enjoying the scene the same way we were and every so often we'd glance over at each other, roll our eyes, shrug and smile. The churchman forbade the use of camera flash but flashes continues to burst around us.

Finally the clock struck the hour. Little windows opened, small figures of the apostles and Christ filed past the windows. Death tolled a tiny bell, Saturn shook, not wanting to die just yet. These were followed by more figures, including a miser with his purse and a dandy adjusting his costume. A cock crowed, a squeaky sound which made everyone laugh. I am fascinated by these clocks, created when the world was amazed by mechanical objects and believed the entire solar system and all systems of cosmography could be replicated, miniaturized and fit into one of these time-pieces. Details of the known world fit in to mark time just the way all the spinning, ticking parts of the galaxy were put together to form a model of the world.

A canal, a garden full of light, town square full of students, a juggler practicing his craft. Brick and cobblestone rucked by tree roots. The smell of mossy water from the old fountain with the lion's head beside the bridge. Strasbourg very green, lush. The whole Alsace-Lorraine region much greener than the rest of France, or at least the tiny area we have seen of the country. A tiny punt moved up and down the canal. This is a city of contrasts – light and dark, sun and shadow, pastel walls and heavy wooden beams, peaceful horizontal views and the elegant vertical. I think the beams here are straighter than those in Rouen, which amazed me by their crookedness. The buildings here look measured, ruled, symmetrical. Rouen made me feel closer to antiquity, to the lives of everyday townspeople. Very easy to imagine a bucket of slop tossed out into the alleys of Rouen.

Near the cathedral is a heavy dark building laden with carvings, faces, details within details, tiny windows. It looked as if it could be carved out of ebony. Cathedral with high arches, statues looking down on us from their niches, usually shared with pigeons. The great red door with blossoming hinges. A tympanum of ivory-white angels.

Street corner collage. Moon-blue, moss-green, sandy beige, deep red doorway and shutters. Salmon pink offset by bright white terrasse tables. Stately buildings with barred windows, talismans and figureheads, the cathedral's towering intricacy. I'd like to know the story behind the grinning pig and the shocked punkish mythical beastie beside it.

Sept. 19

Autobahn interesting in its way; a lesson in intimidation and domination, a capsule of power and class struggle. Audis and BMWs ruled the highway and expected tourists, lesser cars and particularly the Eastern European "peanut cars" to keep their place in the right lane while the Mercedes remained at steady regal paces, above the struggle. I wonder how the East German and newly venturing Czechs felt, crunched into their Skodas, Trabants and Moskvichs, putzing along in the right lane, pausing for frequent breakdowns and overheated engines, seeing the sleek Western cars sail by them. The drivers sit hunched right up to the windshield, and the cars are odd shades of blue, green, yellow – bubblegum colours. We cheered whenever we saw one of these cars pull into the left lane or the few that did not immediately drop back and yield to Western might.

Some of the peanut cars are built from 1965 designs bought from Fiat. Two gas lines as well. Long line of peanut cars at one pump and all the western cars swerving for the "Bleifrei." The autobahns seems to exist primarily as tests of manhood, rampant testosterone, fast cars which refuse to yield and push up within inches of the car in front. The autobahn was the first place in Europe where drivers gave us the finger, displeased when our trusty little Opel passed on the left. Here no one passes on the left. To even enter the left lane is admitting some sort of weakness. Lots of British cars driving through France and on the autobahn. They don't need GB stickers on the back – their right-hand drives are pretty distinct.

Passed through some beautiful countryside in Germany, rolling hills, valleys, distant hills crowned with real castles, miles of forest, which really gives Germany a definition. France, with its rolling hills and highway felt more oceanic. Germany felt like a huge country.

Started seeing village churches with the onion-shaped domes that I remember from my choir trip to Austria. An Eastern influence? Spent the night in Ansbach, another of the small European towns we love so much. Our hotel was over a Chinese food restaurant but we had a delicious dinner at a Gasthof up the street.

Sept. 20

Morning walk around Ansbach – literally. I walked in circles, the snail shell roads leading me into the centre of town no matter which direction I ventured. Eventually I found the road back to the Gasthof. I sat on a bench and became aware of someone standing across the street staring at me. Irritated at first, I was determined to ignore him then realized he was a vagrant and I was sitting on his bench. Extremely well-organized recycling bins; four types in red, white, blue and green all posted with instructions. A woman with a cart carefully selected everything and dropped them through the correct slots. Shops full of American clothes and a surprisingly large McDonald's. We later discovered a nearby US army base.

Back on the Autobahn. More Trabant-tipping. The peanut cars always yield to the westerners as if it is an immutable law of nature to pull over to the shoulders. Wealth and power is the law of the Autobahn. All the skid marks on the pavement were a little disconcerting.

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Plummeted into a tiny place (Maisel maybe?) near the Czech border. Stopped into a bar-restaurant for lunch. A teenager sat by himself nursing a beer, hypnotized by one of the gambling video games we've seen all over Europe. The bartender was friendly and helpful in spite of the language gap, and served us generous hamburger plates. Then the place was inundated by high school students, who were served large glasses of beer, which startled Fred and me. We couldn't imagine drinking that much beer and being able to do anything after that, much less return to school. The bartender may have been lacing their glasses with cider but even so ...

**

Leaving Germany to enter Czechoslovakia was harrowing, the most formidable border crossing I have ever undergone. Two guards stood by a painted line and we drove over to them. A man in a booth barked at us, “Halt!” and ordered us over to the booth. Brave traveller that I am my first reaction was to exclaim, “Don’t shoot!” The agent examined our passports, maintaining a real poker-face and stated: “Kanada.” You could hear the “K” in his pronunciation.

Entering Czechoslovakia was fairly simple. We plummeted into the country without any Czechoslovakian currency, without knowing the language enough to recognize the simplest words for things we needed. Paused in the first town we came across, hoping to find a bank. Apartment complexes just like the Jane-Finch corridor, run-down but no worse or better than the ones in Canada. A few women and children bustling around some dim dusty little stores.

Single family dwellings, which resemble old churches, left to disintegrate. Mud-brown buildings in enclosed villages, not all that dissimilar to the ones in France. Unlike France, utter stillness. Sombre buildings, squares of concrete brown and grey with orange tiled roofs. Leaves beginning to change colour, a young man shoots by us on a small blackened motorbike, without helmet or jacket, fair hair covered in diesel and dust. Occasional roadside markets. The big farms did not look prosperous, certainly not lush like the German farms, but the small gardens were full of vegetables. Rows of curious little chalets, like houses sliced in half with little precise yards all enclosed by wire fences. Dachas? Holiday rentals of some sort? We are approaching a spa town, which I know from German and Czech authors.

Karoly Vary was strange, like going back into time to an early 1960s resort town yet with the overlay of Communism. Line of people, including many old women in babushkas at the potroviny (provisions store), which was greyer than grey. Something monolithic , even geological about some of these great dark buildings. Many old women looking out windows.

Lively exchanges between people, greetings exchanged, all reminding me that journalism specializes in the sensational, the anomaly and rarely even mentions the daily lives of real people. I have read about how closed and silent the people of Eastern Bloc countries are, forced into secrecy because at least one of six people is an informant. I didn't see this here today. Has the situation changed that much since last December? Have things been opening up gradually over the last few years? Has everything I've read about these countries been filtered through heavily biased Western media corporations? I also wondered about all the roadside shrines I saw on our way here. I can't imagine they had all been removed, put in storage and then brought out again after December 1989. They looked pretty strong and enduring.

Good to see people out and about doing their regular business. Schoolkids looked like schoolkids everywhere in jeans, colourful backpacks, stylish haircuts. I wonder who they teach history here. Fred mentioned that history classes have been suspended in the Soviet Union until they can change the curriculum. Here in Czechoslovakia do they have portraits of Vaclav Havel in classrooms or is that still forbidden?

We entered a large hotel where we could change money. The woman at the desk was friendly and could speak some English. She was shocked when we asked to change 200 Deutsch Marks into Czech crowns. She kept asking us if we were sure and she wrote us out a receipt so we could change what we didn't use back into Deutsch Marks. The sense of inferiority extends from cars to money. Then we had coffee (kava) in the big hotel and I kept expecting to see Jackie Kennedy types dressed in pillbox hats enter the room.

There is plenty of tourism, but although large, the hotel is not (yet?) luxurious. The dining room had the austerity of a large church hall. The coffee tasted like French coffee. A group of four at a table, including a man with the largest gold ring I've ever seen. They looked like characters from the movie *Time of the Gypsies*.

Decaying grandeur of the buildings. Chipped facades, crumbling mantles, faces on walls covered in soot. Pollution taking its toll everywhere. You can't escape the smells. Mounds of coal deposited at a coal chute. Two small people loading coal into two small buckets on a small wagon, then scuttling off with them. Police present in olive-coloured uniforms. I felt a little uncomfortable taking pictures. We didn't see them in action; they were simply relentlessly present. The bleakness of the day coloured my view of Karoly Vary. The palace looked cold and white. Some trees by the entrance resembled palm trees. There was just something odd and out-of-time about K-V and I felt disoriented, even a little disturbed.

Lots of bookstores, well-stocked shop windows, signs advertising Russian vodka and a recognizable European look to the buildings and boulevards. Everything seemed to be under construction though. Entire blocks covered in scaffolding, which is great if it means the town is being restored. Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) is a famous spa and has always been the site for European health pilgrimages but today I lost my bearings and felt quite ghostly. The palace looked cold and white. In reality it was at the centre of a pleasant park with people relaxing on benches. The building itself isn't as grandiose as so many in Paris and it wasn't covered in ghoulish gargoyles and falcon crests – so why this feeling of foreboding. Maybe I should take the cure at the spa.

**

On the way to Prague! Hundreds of LIAZ trucks all spewing exhaust out the side. Cars that smell like Coleman oil and burning peanut oil. Passed several orange and white Czech tour buses with blackened tail pipes. We had seen some of these in Paris, very austere compared to the other buses, and they were always the ones we saw being services. Power lines look pretty rusty. Industrial sites with blackened pipes. Statue of workers so coated you could hardly tell what it was originally made of. Now these workers are reduced to shapes made of oil, exhaust, coal, the elements for which they are sacrificed.

Air hazy, the houses by the highway darkened by coal but the Czech countryside isn't that much different from France in its lack of forests. Only Alsace-Lorraine came close to German or Dutch greenness. Czechoslovakia is geographically similar to France with its rolling hills, valleys, oceanic feeling. Similar walled villages, although here the houses are a more uniform wet-sand colour but it is odd to see village churches abandoned, not kept up and promoted as tourist attractions. Almost the appearance of closed-up camouflaged villages during wartime designed to disappear into their surroundings, covered in plain brown wrapping. Some look as if they have been bombed, shaken to the foundations. Hitch-hikers all along the highway – not students.

Not far from Karlovy Vary we found the ruins of a castle on top of a hill. A path and guard rail led to it so people do explore it, but there were no signs for it. Lovely clear view of the countryside and the village at the foot of the hill. Pervasive smell of woodsmoke. Lovely pink church rose above the trees. The pinks here almost seem to be mixed the the grey of a rainy sky. All the pinkish buildings have that rainy sky look. Orange tiled roofs link the Czech countryside to all rest of Europe.

Czechoslovakia evokes many complex feelings. On one hand it is deeply refreshing to see a country not made over for tourists. Yet the poverty makes you realize how much the people can use tourist dollars. Every little town in France had at least one souvenir store and I don't think we ever quite got off the tourist circuit. Here there are no tourist info locations any people we passed looked at us as if we had arrived from outer space.

I felt like spending money everywhere we went , yet doing that would also turn me into a rich westerner paternalistically peeling money off my huge wad. I'm congenitally underemployed, living from contract to contract and I have never felt so economically powerful in my life. A strange unpleasant feeling. Just by crossing one border we became part of the Audi-BMW gang, the people that Czechs defer to on the road, in stores, in restaurants.

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Plummeting into Prague was a little like arriving in Rouen, only this was darker, more unknown. We ended up in a definite non-tourist area where the soot-coloured buildings were dark as cliffs and unwelcoming. Getting late, we needed a hotel. We rattled over streetcar tracks, saw more potroviny with the 1960s signs and windows filled with generic brands of cookies, crackers, snacks. Again the feeling of being able to buy out the stories we entered for on-the-road snacks.

While in search of The Splendid Hotel, we were threatened by a man brandishing some sort of nasty little weapon, possibly a branding iron. Maybe just a shaving crop. He shouted at us and when Fred shrugged and looked apologetic for not understanding him he moved toward us. I stepped out, glared at the man, prepared to shout back in my foreign language. He stepped back in surprise and we beetled away. Shaken by this encounter we continued our journey alternating between pockets of darkness and well-lit area. We also kept finding ourselves driving over bridges in search of a hotel. Little did we know Prague has sixteen bridges and we kept wondering how we kept ending up back on the bridge!

Very few cars especially compared to Paris and we had no problem getting out of wrong way streets and no exits. Drivers seem very courteous. Europeans in general seem stubborn about right-of-way. This was the first place someone actually waved us ahead. Lots of tourists, particularly Germans and a lot of British. We saw a Benetton but not a McDonald's. No postcard or souvenir stores. Hotels full, trying to cope with the new influx of tourism. Scrawled sign at the tourist bureau taped over the wicket said No Rooms.

While walking around trying to find a room half a dozen Czechs approached us wanting to change Deutsch Marks, including one who offered to put us up in exchange for the coveted DM. Most of our transactions were carried out in Fred's Dutch with a German accent. Germans seem to have replaced Americans as the economic force to be reckoned with, not only here but in most of Europe. But the US still has the cultural cachet. Kiosks sold jeans, played rock music, waved American flags. Czechs were wearing shirts with slogans. We even saw a Nova Scotia sweatshirt. Club Med bumper sticker on a peanut car.

Went from stereotypical Eastern bloc buildings and stores to areas full of magnificent architecture; opera houses, murals, sculptures as wonderful as anything in the Louvre. Prague is a living art museum and suddenly I was staring up at a painting, pink clouds, heavenly blue sky, God and cherubim. Ventured up a hill into the castle area where the consulates were, eventually making our way out again and in front of the Savoy Hotel. We found our cheap hotel, settled with a proprietor who could speak rudimentary English. Everyone here speaks German the way the Dutch speak English.

The hotel was gently, poignantly imperfect with its peeling paint and faded rug. Spent an uneasy night. Police cars visible and disturbing, barreling full speed down the streets, sirens piercing the night. These sirens conjured up all the associations with police states our imaginations could conjure. The sound struck fear into our hearts and we wondered how the residents felt. Maybe they're used to it, or maybe the cops just drive around now like cowboys. Late at night the door handle started rattling and we both woke up several times imagining police at the door.

Sept. 21

The sun came out and the gilt spires, cupolas and roofs of the city blazed and the river reflected gold. The Vlatava River is even more beautiful than the Seine. Because there's so much less traffic, there's a more peaceful enchanted feeling on the bridges. Prague dates back to the 9th Century, when the castle was built and the surrounding district was named Hradcany – one of the cities in Banville's *Kepler*. There's a statue of Kepler and Tycho Brahe together, right outside our hotel. We continued climbing through mazes of crooked streets to Zlatá Ulicka (the Golden Lane), a narrow alley linking some tiny colourful houses set next to the castle wall. Kafka resided and worked at Number 22.

Prague – Praha – the threshold! Prague not only welcomes but claims artists, writers, musicians. In the Malá Strana district there is an old house with a star above the entrance indicating where Goethe might have lived had he ever come to Prague. Looking down from Hradcany Castle, the city's towers rear like medieval knights guarding the city, spears pointing toward the sky.

Prague was built on seven hills and is made up of towns within the city. There is the Old Town of legend, the part that contains the old Jewish cemetery; Malá Strana on the left bank of the Moldau below the castle. This is an enclave of Baroque palaces, monasteries and churches, homes of astronomers, adventurers and alchemists. One of the places we must have driven through accidentally last night. The New Town was the personal creation of Charles IV, who ordered himself a Gothic town. Today, New Town is the metropolis between Wenceslas Square and the National Theatre.

Below Hradcany is a street called Novy Svet (New World) which was inhabited by poor people who gave their houses golden names: At the Golden Horn, At the Golden Star, At the Golden Stork, Golden Tree, Golden Plough.

We set off to find our contact, Mr Janowitz. On our own using Ken's map we found the area, just not the right street. Language problems did not hinder the people in assisting us nor Fred in understanding the gestures. A couple on a corner pointed us in the right direction and a German woman in a record store filled in the gaps. The colours of the buildings: olive, gold, beige, peach. Peeling paint, watermarks, smudges. Caches of art embedded in the most ordinary of buildings. A niche containing a Virgin with a crown on her head, holding a regal Christ child, also crowned while an angel's face keeps watch over the arch. Variations of this Virgin and Child all over the city, in the most unexpected corners. Communism must have always coexisted with religion here.

We also found Kozí Staré Mestro – Praha 1, Mr Janowitz's address on a street of stately buildings, lovely in dappled sunlight. We rang the bell and talked to his wife. He wasn't going to be back until 8:00. We gave her ours and Ken's names. Ken will be very happy to hear she's very much alive and looked well. I think Ken said Mr J married a Czech woman. It was exciting just to find this splendid apartment and speaking to Mrs J.

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Prague is full of legends. There is the Convent of St Joseph where the Abbess Maria Elekta was sanctified. When her grave was opened her shroud was gone but the body was unchanged, lying before them as on the day of her death, though her eyes were darker. There is always at least one enigmatic detail to every story. We saw the Faust house in Charles Square where, according to legend, Dr Faust lived, read conjuring books and sold his soul to the devil.

Then there's John Nepomuk who refused to betray the Queen's confidences to King Wenceslas and was thrown off the Charles Bridge one night in 1393, into the dark waters of the Moldau, while the king's halberdiers pushed back the people with their spears – a long tradition of authority imposed against the wishes of the people. When the holy man disappeared into the waves, five small blue flames appeared on the surface.

Hradcany Castle was once home to alchemists. After the great fire of 1541, poor people squatted in wooden dwellings under the castle arches. Legend has it there is a house on Alchemists' Street that can only be seen during the fog and even then only by Sunday children. It is called "The Wall at the Last Lantern." In daylight one sees only a grey stone but this stone conceals a treasure; the founding stone laid by the Order of the Asiatic Brethren, who allegedly created Prague.

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Saw a parade at Wenceslas Square. Small and seemingly spontaneous, promotion for an improvisational dance troupe. There was a clown, someone banging a big bass drum and an elephant handing out flyers. There was a medieval feeling to this parade; minstrels and jesters. The colours, the polka dots on the clown's suit, the merry expressive faces and the spontaneity of their passage through the square made me think of story-book characters. Utterly charming and completely the opposite of dull regimented North American parades.

The square itself is vast, actually a boulevard. Mix of old and new, the everyday and the new tourist places, the grim and joyous. Saw the statue of King Wenceslas, who was the guy from the Christmas carol. The historical king was revered by Czechs, even the subject of a mystical cult. No one could prevent the people from laying wreathes, jars of flowers and photographs of their loved ones at his feet. There was a memorial near the statue and I actually saw a woman placing fresh flowers in the jars and wiping the photographs. Very poignant. In 1968 King Wenceslas was covered with resistance posters. I found it very stirring to be in that square, center of defiance, rebellion and subversion. For a while there was a black flag of mourning at the statue, which said, "We don't give up."

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Walking through the arches of the square stone arcades in Old Town Square, past the brass fountain with its Baroque railing and across the stone bridge with its statues of saints, ancient river running underneath. Doorways received and released me, palaces with carved portals, lion's heads and heavy bronze rings. High proud windows. As we walked up the road toward the castle, the city with its roofs and gables receded in a golden haze.

Malá Strana's churches, monasteries and palaces have become embassies, but there are still towers, cupolas, street-corner saints, dark corners where time has stopped. Any moment Charles IV could emerge from one of the secret underground passages. These passages have never been discovered but everyone claims they are there. Eyes seem to be gazing at you from every building; intelligent, stoic, haunted, ironic, full of personality. View from left to right: Prague of the Hundred Towers; Hradcany with Parler's bell-tower of St Vitus; St Nicholas with the greenish cupola and Lurago's belfry; the violet spire of St Thomas and the black beer brewery of the Augustinians, as the monks were the best brewers.

Old Jewish Cemetery. Storybook tablets. Prague was the home of Rabbi Loew, the Cabballah student who created the golem – his sorcerer’s apprentice. The Old-New synagogue in the Jewish quarter is said to have survived all conflagrations in the ghetto because two mysterious white doves would sit on its roof whenever fire broke out, to warn the inhabitants. Also a legend about a subterranean corridor leading straight from Old Jewish Town in Prague to Jerusalem.

The oldest tombstone in the cemetery is of the poet Avigdor Karo dated April 25, 1439. No more horizontal space to enlarge the cemetery and the only solution was to cover existing graves with fresh soil and insert new coffins. Centuries passed and there were twelve different layers of graves, one on top of the other. Now it’s a wilderness of stones leaning against each other, toppling on top of each other drunkenly. The Talmud says they must not be moved, but not even the Talmud can prevent them from sinking lower into the earth as years go by. Every century the tombstones sink another ten centimeters. Only the tops remain visible on some. Sinking as Venice is sinking; one returning to the earth, the other the sea.

The nazis allowed Jews to take walks in the cemetery and it was the only playground permitted for the children. At the Klaus and Pinkas synagogues the nazis set up a Jewish museum designed to display the culture of an extinct race! It has been kept as a museum, only to a living people. Its walls bear the names of the 77,290 people “retired” by the nazis. It was a good feeling, watching Jews descending into the little shul to worship Rosh Hoshana. Some tourists were affronted because the worshipping Jews prevented them from seeing the museum! A few people actually started arguing and brandishing tickets.

One of the museums looks like a castle gatehouse with a small Magen David and gold Hebrew lettering over the entrance. Inside was a collection of children’s art from the Holocaust. Charcoal drawings, resembling Käthe Kollwitz’s, were framed in barbed wire. Very effective. Small drawings in glass reflected endlessly down the wall, twenty shadows, reminders of those who weren’t able to tell their stories. The light in that room was alive, audible, numinous. When we looked through the guest book we saw the name Rapoport from Montréal. Fred recognized the name from weddings he works with Ya’acov.

The museums are also in a state of flux. English translations have only recently appeared with the Czech and German. I was a little disappointed that most of the museum buildings were closed but it is good to know they are actually being renovated, that the government is taking an interest in them. It started feeling as if all my attempts to see Jewish artifacts were thwarted. Even the famous statue of Christ on the Charles Bridge was covered in scaffolding.

We were able to see one other museum building, which contained facsimiles of medieval books, among other treasures. Fred was amazed to discover how Jews had been involved in astronomy, in Galileo's work, all the activity in the Age of Enlightenment. On the upper floor were photos and documentation about the Holocaust and the roots of antisemitism. Good to see busloads of students, including a large group from the Netherlands.

The Jewish presence in Prague is interesting. The Czechs are not known for their tolerance, yet this is the one place in Europe where I have felt Jewish presence, where it hasn't been confined to one historical area of the city, like the Jewish section of Montmartre in Paris. There was no living Jewish presence in the Netherlands either. The shuls we saw there were mostly hidden and closed, maintained as tourist sites.

The most bizarre site was in Deventer where an old shul, with the Magen David nicely preserved, had been converted into a fashion boutique. The figure of a naked woman adorned the wall right beside the doorway of the shul. It has only been in Prague that I saw any of the shuls as real places of worship. Interesting how in a land that I know was virulently anti-semitic I really felt Jewish presence and identity.

After seeing what we could of the museums, we had dinner at the same restaurant where we had morning coffee. Restaurants are still scarce enough that this one became a real meeting place; tourists on one side, Czechs on the other. The staff work long hours. We had the same waitress we had this morning – and the same man was sitting in the washroom collecting his two crowns and handing out generous sections of toilet paper. My initial reaction to the man in the bathroom must have been quite visible, for the jovial German we were talking to, laughed and said, "That was my wife's reaction exactly." He saved his table for us and left an enormous tip.

Nearby, a group of British students compared records they had bought in Prague, rare albums at bargain prices by the sounds of it. Dinner was a choice between goulasche and steak. Fred requested goulasche and I went for the steak. The British students all ordered ice cream desserts. By the time we finished our dinners and asked for the same desserts, the waitress very apologetically told us the restaurant had run out of ice cream. Once again overwhelmed by a poignant tender feeling. Her expression was so much one of "I can't do anything." I wanted to tell her she didn't have to apologize.

She brightened up when I ordered a pitcher of beer, even knowing I would have to drink it myself since Fred won't drink beer. "Now that's something I can give you," her face seemed to say. I was served an enormous pitcher for 40 crowns, which is something like 20 cents! No wonder every table was laden with these pitchers. Good beer, too. The cafés have a hasty, thrown-together look but beer is always plentiful. There are taverns (hostinecs, pivnickys) all over the city and what we've seen of the countryside. They are dark and look like serious drinking taverns, missing only the "Bienvenue aux dames" signs. There was a hostinec across the street from the restaurant where men stood outside with their pitchers of beer, roaming around, crossing the street, pitchers in hand.

After our supper we stood in line at a potroviny to pick up some Devil's Blood as a souvenir, forty-proof alcohol with the image of a devil on the label. Then we both squeezed into a phone booth to call Mr Janowitz again. Fred spoke to Mr J but I could hear his warm garrulous voice through the receiver. He didn't remember Ken, so our note had puzzled him. He had hoped we would call back for the sake of his own curiosity. Finally he figured out that Ken was one of his daughter's history students. and said we should have written him a letter. He works as a tour guide and said he could have given us an excellent tour through the city. I am so sorry we hadn't thought to do that! We told him that we couldn't spend any more time as Fred's grandmother expected us back – tomorrow in fact.

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Twilight stroll on the Charles Bridge. Many tourists but not overwhelming. Lots of space between groups. Vendors under the statues selling prints, artwork. Tourist groups thinning out. Some vendors remained on the bridge, flicking lighters to show their wares. I bought a Kafkaesque ink drawing. The poor guy burned his fingers lighting matches so I could make a selection. Wending our way down the bridge we passed some Czechs playing frisbee with Russian army hats and they invited us to join in. They pretended to set it on fire and we all roared with laughter. They spoke no English but when Fred asked to see a general's hat, one of the Czechs found him a hat with a gold braid. We both tried it on and postured to applause and guffaws. We bought the hat, unable to resist such a memento of this very special time and place.

Darkness descending, river flowing into history, sense of jubilant freedom, defiance, sounds of jazz bands playing on the bridge. The feeling of transition, tentative freedom, uncertain celebration, all the emotions mingling as darkness mingled with light. We continued walked toward the castle, past the chic boutiques, antique and china stores. A group of Czechs walking just ahead of us spontaneously started singing, parts and harmonies, walking toward the castle almost blazing with light against the dark sky. It was so beautiful, holy, a perfect magical moment, tears streamed down my cheeks and we just followed these people up the street until they finally turned down an alleyway.

Sept. 22

Left Prague, tears streaming down my cheeks. How I wish we could have stayed much longer. Back on the highway. Coal smoke coming out of chimneys, the plucky little tour buses chugging and lurching down the highway, mushroom coloured villages hunkered into the earth, rolling countryside, sparse cornfields, peanut cars, queenly old churches, a roadside potroviny where the people looked at us in disbelief for buying their products. On the radio a woman spoke in English about Czechoslovakia's hopes of joining the EEC in a few years.

Sombre day. We entered one town that looked prettier than the others, greener with trees and a park concealed by a wall. It was in this already weepy mood that I noticed the town's name: Terezín. Theresienstadt concentration camp. It is as if fate brought us right to the gate, which was painted in terrifying black and white. The weather and site reflected each other and I was chilled to the bone, physically and emotionally. Rain verging on sleet. I shivered as we walked through the yard, flat as a field in the Netherlands, studded with row upon row of graves. The only other person in the yard was a woman tending the graves. We continued to the "Administrative Yard" where we were faced with the dreaded sign of newsreels and nightmares: *Arbeit Macht Frei*.

The guide book was very blunt. The English wasn't perfect and the reversed syntax and lack of articles added to the impact in surprising, fascinating ways. Words with a twist, impossible to take for granted. On the Administrative Yard: "To this yard the transports of prisoners used to come. The enlisting procedure never did without maltreatment, beating and pummelling."

Single cells in First Yard: "They were intended for the prisoners sentenced to more severe punishment or to death. In the adjacent yard a lot of prisoners were beaten to death in a bestial way." This reminds me of Marianne Faithfull's song, "Say it in Broken English." The word "initially" spelled "inicially" made me really look at this word as if i'd never seen it before, the "c" giving it an ominous quality. The cells were desolate. A dead flower lay on one of the bunks of the group cell. I couldn't move my eyes away from it.

"You find yourself in the Little Fortress of Terezín, which is part of a fortress system built at the end of the 18th Century, including the town of Terezín as well." The Little Fortress was used as a prison during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Frequent mention of Gavrilo Pricip, who in 1914, attempted to assassinate the Austrian successor to the throne of Franz Ferdinand.

During the nazi occupation, June 1940, the Prague gestapo established the Little Fortress as a police prison, which soon became a concentration camp. In 1941-42, the nazis turned the town of Terezín into a concentration camp for Jewish prisoners. In 1944, another camp was established in Litomerice, whose prisoners had to toil in an underground factory called "Richard." Fred found it disturbing to be spoken to in German at the entrance to a concentration camp. I was relieved to come across other visitors, many Germans and the same group of Dutch school kids we saw at the Prague museum.

We went down into the Underground Passage, which was part of the original fortification. Felt like miles of low stone ceiling and lantern-lit walls curving in around us. It was only here in this closed-in labyrinth that I was able to shake the desolation of the camp and imagine myself in medieval times, finding escape routes under the besieged palace, but my blood ran cold again when I imagined what jackboots would sound like, resonating through the passage only a turn away.

Emerged into a grassy courtyard, which was really a place of execution. In 1945, fifty-two prisoners "mostly members of the youth revolting communist organization called Vanguard were executed." From this place we came to the mass grave. The exhumation in 1945 revealed 601 bodies in this grave. They were taken out and "placed with reverence" in the National Graveyard. Then at the end of the field in a lonely corner, ghosts; statues of prisoners, starving, weeping and so very real. At that moment the wind picked up and I wanted to shield the statues, cover them with my own living flesh.

"Nowadays the Memorial of Terezín fulfills the function of a culturally political and educational institution whose main task is, on the basis of scientifically verified facts and in dialectical continuities with this recent and cruel past, by means of all specific forms accessible to our institution, to arouse conscience and thinking of our contemporaries, especially that of our youths, so that fascism, which has not disappeared from the world yet may never more have a chance to set world war fire."

We continued our journey back to Oma's house. The border crossing from Czechoslovakia into East Germany was easy. Two line-ups again: peanut cars which were being detained and Western cars allowed to go through with only a cursory inspection. An agent looked in our trunk and pressed the suitcase with his fingers. A cute Czechoslovakia border guard looked at our passports and smiled at me. Then we were in East Germany.

We passed through some resort towns which gave me an impression of East Germany being far more prosperous than Czechoslovakia. Certainly more forested area, which surprised me. We passed hundred of roadside vegetable and frites stands. Blei frei gas available but very few gas stations. We were running on empty and if we hadn't found a policeman who directed us to the nearest station we might have been in trouble. As it was we ended up in a very long line, divided as usual between Western cars at the blei frei pumps and the peanut cars at their watering hole.

Impression of prosperity was short-lived. Nearing Dresden I started seeing the same sorts of run-down apartment complexes, antiquated blackened industry, wet-brown buildings, dingy store windows and faded signs. I didn't feel any of my usual stir at approaching a large city. There was a definite down-at-the-heels feel to it. After being in Czechoslovakia my attitude toward the autobahn grew even worse. I had no patience whatsoever for the machismo of the mighty Audis and BMWs.

The border crossing between East and West Germany was as eerie and spectral as I imagined. It was vast. The apparatus for keeping people apart was still there, but all deserted. The watchtower had broken windows. Lights mounted on long stalks were surrounded in foliage. Vines twisted around the poles. All of the signs had been blued-out; erased. Still there but very ghostly.

Cars whizzed by. I had to get out and take a picture. Vast, forlorn, desolate, all in shades of blue grey, clouds piled high in the sky with distant traces of pink sunset. I had wanted to get an East German stamp on my passport, especially since reunification officially occurs in October, but there was no one around to ask. This is a huge border structure and must have been terrifying. Now it is deserted, nothing but the wind and the sound of cars speeding by. Dark, pouring rain when we entered the Netherlands. There and back again.

Sept. 23

Spent the day with Oma. Throughout our stay she had been urging Fred to ask questions about his parents because, as she said, she would not be around for very much longer and he would regret not asking. He asked her what she and his Opa had done during the war. The question startled her. Fred is convinced his grandparents were sent by the Dutch government to help with the technical side of setting up the Coastwatcher network in the Pacific. Her reaction was strong but it could have been because of the war itself. Whether or not Fred is right, it's still a fascinating story to me, someone who has such a different background.

Fred's grandfather was director of the Spanish subsidiary of the multinational electronics company, Phillips, and they were based in Barcelona for much of the time Fred's mother and her siblings were growing up. During the Spanish Civil War Opa stayed in Spain and the rest of the family returned to the Netherlands. In 1939, the Dutch board of directors of Phillips were evacuated to New York City. Due to lack of skilled engineers in the US, Mr Van der Harst is asked to come to the US. He agreed and arrangements were made to smuggle him and his family to the US. Yes, Oma used the word "smuggle" and she never said how this was done. In June 1940, the family arrived in the US with all immigration procedures and visas taken care of. They were escorted through Customs by Phillips officials.

During the voyage, Oma received word that her mother died in the Netherlands. The message did not give the date of death. Oma is also informed that a nephew (her brother's son) was in trouble with the Germans in the Netherlands. She didn't specify what sort of trouble. After she and her husband arrived in the US, arrangements were made to send the children (Fred's mother and siblings) to camp to learn English. Oma looked for an apartment, then went to Curaçao to tell her brother about his son's trouble in the Netherlands. She didn't say anything more about this part of the story.

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After being set up in the US, Mr van der Harst was asked to go to Indonesia, Java/Sumatra to improve the building of factories in those places. He is given carte blanche. He refused to go without Oma as she was born and raised in Indonesia and had a brother, friends and contacts there. Sometime between June and December they headed off, after making a will leaving everything to their oldest daughter, Fred's mother Marria. They went via Hawaii to Sydney, Australia. In Sydney they were met by Mr vdH's assistant director from Spain. Mr vdH had papers giving him priority on plane seats, but Oma did not have the same status. They and the assistant (who they were not expecting) went on to Java/Sumatra. They contacted Oma's brother, who was an engineer and in the Indonesian Armed Forces.

In Djakarta (1942) they received word that Pearl Harbour had been bombed and the Japanese were attacking the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies. Refugees from Singapore, who were entering Djakarta, confirmed the seriousness of the situation. There were no flights left so the van der Harsts started looking for other ways out of the region, using their government contacts. At some point, generals MacArthur and Montgomery were both in the region. One day the van der Harsts received a phone call telling them a certain ship was sailing that night, and they should go to the port immediately. They were transported in a chauffeur-driven limousine. When they arrived at the port, the officers didn't know anything about a ship leaving. The ship sat for three days. At some point, a cargo of "very heavy black stuff" was loaded onto it. "Most people in Djakarta could not leave because they did not have exit or entry visas, but we had visas and papers *to go anywhere.*"

The ship finally sailed at midnight with two to three warships escorting it, headed for an unknown destination. Three other merchant ships left about the same time, but none of them made it to safety. After several days at sea Opa learned they were enroute to NY via South Africa for refueling. The cargo of heavy black stuff turned out to be gold from Sumatra/Dutch East Indies.

It was storming when they arrived in Capetown, which was very fortunate as it provided protection from the U-boats and Q-ships prowling around the Cape Town area. “A telegram was sent to NYC to say we were safe but censors removed location so Phillips in NYC did not know where we were.” Ship finally arrived safely in NYC. The van der Harsts were reunited with their children the day after arrival.

Certainly an exciting story, full of intriguing gaps and ambiguity. I’m as anxious to believe his grandparents were involved with the Coast Watchers as he is, but I also know to never underestimate the power of money, business and the might of multi-national companies. I’ve perused too many *Fortune* magazines at Howard Ross so for me, it’s equally plausible it’s a story of wealth and privilege that always floats above all else, including war. As for immigration to the US, there’s no doubt that being Northern European Dutch “captains of industry” would put them right on the A list. Rich Dutch businesspeople will never be considered “tired huddled masses.” Could there have been bribery involved in getting a berth on that last ship? As for “government contacts,” multi-national companies and governments are known for their close ties. However, I really want Fred’s version to be true. After all, she told us she was naturally a very reserved person who had to learn the hard way to be open, and she has always been able to keep secrets all her life.

Fred’s grandfather was involved in the making of radio tubes. Oma did have strong Indonesian contacts. She is complex and intelligent enough for such work. Then there’s Fred’s grandfather, who seems a suspiciously empty character. As seen through Oma, she either didn’t know him very well, is keeping her knowledge of him to herself or he truly is only a company man with an exaggerated sense of loyalty to Phillips. And company-men were like that – are still like that. He could also be a true Man Without Qualities and a perfect spy. If he was a pragmatic, cautious, rational man in a high corporate position, why would he take such risks?

With Oma, I often feel like I’ve been eaten by a master strategist at a chess game. She always seems to know what she’s doing. There’s a purpose and an agenda to her actions. This is a woman who makes notes for her speeches to Fred. She is obsessed with memory and retaining particulars of everything in her world.

She has the ability to manipulate, highly useful in spycraft. She loves to con people into believing she is a helpless old woman. Either she has developed these abilities for a reason (spying) or she has spent a lifetime of being misunderstood and this is a defense mechanism. Of course it could be both. Her interest in engineering could merely be caused by being a good company wife and having a brother who was an engineer. Or there could be more behind a rather in-depth interest.

Another ambiguity: She has already established that she plays dumb, innocent, old, what have you. Her intelligence is obvious, yet a lot of her story, in those critical gaps and narrative breakdowns, make her look like a real naïve rich wife – Lucille Ball in Indonesia. What does one make of the story of the chauffeur-driven limousine driving back and forth so many times during a dangerous time – to pick up her clothes? And then she turns around and scorns the British who, during wartime, brought evening clothes and golf clubs! Maybe it's just a lack of self-awareness or some hypocrisy we all have. All her views are coloured by colonialism – maybe she doesn't realize there's something frivolous about sending a driver back and forth for clothes during a wartime escape. Even if Fred never resolves it, it is still a fascinating story. To me, the real story is the ambiguity and the attempt to parse a wealthy colonial background and outlook that couldn't be more different from mine.

Oma was visibly relieved to return to her favourite theme of Fred's parents' marriage, dissecting the relationship and exhorting Fred to be a good son. She is also the only person in that family to talk about my book and she peppered me with questions. She wanted to know how I wrote dialogue, how I could possibly remember conversations. I told her I have a very poor memory and if I don't write something down, it's gone. For me, dialogue is more a matter of finding someone's rhythm or wavelength; the words themselves are easy to fill in once I have the right energy.

Oma was interested, intrigued by this. She asked me about the dedication, how my father felt to see such a beautiful dedication to himself. I told her he had never seen it, that I had been informed about the book's publication on the day of his funeral. She was instantly, sincerely sympathetic. Hers was the deepest understanding of how I had felt. She did not utter platitudes and did not try to claim that stupid book could possibly make up for my father's death. She simply said, "That's terrible. A terrible, terrible sad thing to happen. Him not knowing. And you had to live with that."

Oma took us out for pannekoeken and Fred and I were able to have poofertjes again. After Prague the Netherlands seemed very small and close. Although it was Saturday, the only places open were the bicycle shop and our snack bar.

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Sunday, waiting for our flight. Everything closed – except for the prostitute in the Deventer window. Two choices: church or prostitute. We whiled most of the afternoon before the flight in Amsterdam. Miserable day of rain. Even in the city, only kitschy tourist shops and the Red Light District were open for business. Our flight went smoothly – everything had gone smoothly. We hadn't even run out of gas in East Germany. It was a wonderful trip.

Dave and Claire met us at the airport. Claire was excited and waving at us.. Nice warm welcome. They received our first impressions of the trip on that dreamlike journey from Mirabel to St-Sauveur. I don't even remember the drive from St-S to Montréal. The monsters greeted us with howls. We had expected them to be aloof and I couldn't believe how happy they were to see us. They slept on top of us all night.

Sept. 27

Finally starting to feel a little less disoriented back in Montréal. Visited Gail on her Thursday night shift at Howard Ross. I wore the Soviet hat into the library and we laughed, a deep cleansing kindred spirit laughter. She said she's been lonely without Cynthia and me; the library's been like a morgue. Louise is still trying to form an alliance with Gail, wanting her to have lunch with her, etc.

Dorothy is learning the automated circulation and kardexing procedures but she is as uncooperative as ever. I've been very lonely too, consigned to Siberia at Nursing Social Work, deriving and dropping cataloguing records all day long; helping close down a library I loved. Gail and I were very glad to see each other. Two years is too long to work as a replacement contractor. Not working there is proving to be as big an adjustment as working there once was.

Sept. 29

Party at Mary Rose's new place. She is sharing a big gorgeous apartment on St-Viateur with two room-mates, Véronique and Suzanne. Véronique is from Belgium and the whole night had a European feeling to it, reinforcing the sense of not having returned to North America yet. Maybe I will never truly return. Véronique is a dancer, preparing for a cross-country tour with a children's troupe. At first, I was afraid it would be one of those evenings where the French and English stayed in their separate groups. Véronique seemed proud of not being able to speak English (from Belgium?!) and of course Mary Rose is appallingly resistant to French. They must make interesting room-mates. When Véronique discovered that Fred is Dutch she gave us both the cold shoulder. But after this inauspicious beginning the night opened up and some wonderful things happened.

Stewart arrived, a friend of Mary Rose's who looked like a beaming Jewish guru, and circulated between the groups like an ambassador of good will. Met Abraham, a warm, generous, multilingual man from Tanzania. One of his languages is Swahili. He is a dance instructor and brought everyone together by talking about African and Brazilian music. I met Martine, who I liked very much. Tall, thin, very fair, sensitive face. We talked about languages and how shy I was about speaking French, that I understand and read it better than I speak it and so I'm too embarrassed to speak. She said she had felt the exact same way about English. She lived with an English family for a while and that was the only way she could overcome her shyness.

Someone played a tape of lambada music. Mary Rose and I started dancing. Mary Rose and I should never attempt conversations. We should just attend parties, drink wine and dance. The tedium of too many of our conversations drops away when we get into our bodies and the joy of living. Others soon joined us so we formed a circle; Martine, Stewart, Abraham and Véronique. Véronique, hoping to show us all how it's done, asked if anyone would do the lambada with her. Turned out Abraham teaches lambada classes and he pointed out that she wasn't moving in true rhythm to the music. This seemed to make her relax and she eventually joined in with the rest of us in just having fun.

Abraham's critical eye seemed to turn the rest of us silly. We hopped and howled like apes. I started kicking my legs out and shouting, "Hoy! Hoy! Hoy!" and we even did conga lines around the room, me with a pillow on my head substituting for a pineapple. Martine and I were definitely dancing with each other, playing off on each other's every movement. Any time I introduced a silly move to the group she immediately picked up on it and the rest followed. By this time Véronique had completely melted and she joined up in our ridiculous dances, displaying some cool up-over-the-head dancer's kicks. Fred and I left at the best time, as soon as the dancing ended and the joints came out, just before everyone divided back into little separate cells again.

Mary Rose and I did speak briefly. She met a Rastafarian in a park one afternoon. They talked, connected; they made love. They were seeing each other for a while but he used her, drained her both emotionally and financially, borrowing four hundred dollars from her that she can't afford and knows she'll never see again. She also told me she liked my short hair cut. Interesting how she likes my short hair after leaving Morrie. When she was with him she was always urging me to grow my hair long, and I suspected she was just echoing Morrie's long-haired fantasies. Now all of a sudden the short hair is "really me" and I should have cut it long ago. Just for the record, I have worn my hair short ever since I met her. It's her vision that has changed. No wait, it's now her own vision- not Morrie's.

**

Exiled at Nursing Social Work. I don't feel real. My partner, Eno, is good-natured, very competent, knows the NOTIS system inside and out. He complimented me by saying I was the quickest learner he had ever instructed. He's a Library Studies student at Concordia and he also studies linguistics. He's friendly and we talked about McGill vs Concordia and how we both prefer Concordia. We also talked about Chomsky and syntactical ambiguity. He is Spanish and approaches English differently than most of his classmates and the professor. One of the sentences they were to analyse for ambiguity contained the words "English professor." Everyone in the class had a problem finding any ambiguity, including me, when he showed me the sentence.

We all assumed "English professor" meant "professor of English." Eno said he also missed the ambiguity because to him, the professor was obviously from England! The entire class had all gone in circles, parsing the sentence, analysing the intonation of every syllable. Of course "English professor" was the ambiguity they were supposed to find. I wish Eno and I could be working together under different circumstances.

**

Cynthia tracked me down and came to visit. Her talk of McGill, Circulation and her boyfriend Matthew brought some life into this morgue. The atmosphere at NSW is moribund. A skeleton staff does the minimum in maintaining the day-to-day. Anyone else who comes into the library is taking books away or overseeing the closing of cataloguing records and the removal of shelf list cards. Ailsa took a leave of absence. Betty left her radio for Eno and me, tuned to the CBC. Long afternoons of CBC and classical music just adds to the weird spacey malaise. Only the news, every hour on the hour, provides markers, brings me back into a world where time actually passes. Cynthia's visit made me feel alive again.

**

Dinner with Dave and Claire at L'Hotellerie. We go almost every week now. A ritual, a constant in life. Dave has been culling jokes from the *Reader's Digest* to insert into speeches for his Toastmasters group. How did I ever come to know a Toastmaster!

Dave has had many incarnations. This new middle-aged Dave of Toastmasters, suits and ties and businesses seems so different from the Dave who went to John Abbott with Fred, the joints he used to offer, the drunken drives to his friend Sam's. I found out that he and Claire have known each other for fifteen years and met while they were both working at the Chateau Champlain. He was a parking lot attendant and she was a cashier. Claire impresses me more and more with her intelligence, good judgment and sense of humour. She has both authority and grace. Even though she often drops a topic out of her strong sense of courtesy, she doesn't back down from her own opinions. She and Dave have a double-dictator relationship; she doesn't hesitate to disagree with him or point something out in her best teacherly manner.

Because English is the primary language for the three of us, we sometimes end up unintentionally excluding Claire, especially when we talk about old TV shows. Dave started criticizing the Métro for its lack of clear signs. I thought he was being a little insensitive and I saw a helpless, schmucky look on Claire's face, an expression I've never seen on her before and she said, "I'm afraid we're not an efficient people. Not like the Swiss, the Dutch or the English." I've never actually thought of the English as an efficient people, but here in Quebec they are in with the Swiss, etc. I disagreed with Dave and said I had an easier time finding my way around on the Métro than in most places. Dave teasingly said, "Ahh you shut up. You're wrecking my speech."

The conversation switched to travel, something all four of us love. Dave and Claire both had a miserable time in Paris and found the Parisiens rude and obnoxious, inefficient and officious, all the stereotypes. I saw a completely opposite Paris. I saw one that was very friendly, helpful, down-to-earth, full of markets, rooted in the provinces. Similar to my first impressions of Montréal, come to think of it.

We mentioned our travels through East and West Germany. Claire surprised me by saying, "The Germans are a nationalistic, imperialistic people. It's part of their nature, in their language." She spoke passionately. I was surprised only because she usually remains fair, impartial and courteous while at dinner. Dave turned sharply to her and said, "That's nonsense, Claire. The Germans are good people." Fred and I agreed with Claire, and I could see the alliance shift; the Dutch, English and French now opposing the Swiss.

**

Judy Symansky came into the library today. She is just a lovely lovely person. I had a good talk with her about the closing of NSW and about Europe. She has a natural grace and elegance, young in spirit, full of humour and understanding. I always felt she had a real sympathy for the young people, casuals and circulation shleps at Howard Ross. She seemed delighted to see me. She's been pulling some books from the library for her Regulated Industries department and feels as badly about NSW closing as I do.

"When I went downstairs I spilled this whole box of catalogue cards. Don't tell anyone but it's my way of sabotage," she said winking.

"And you should see the records I'm really closing," I added.

She said she didn't agree with the closing at all. "It would never even be considered if it were Engineering or Law."

She asked me about Europe, what my favourite place had been. When I said Prague she said "I thought so." I told her about the singing and she told me a lovely story about Venice. She was in St Mark's Square and a choir assembled and began singing. Suddenly all these Venetian kids in the square started singing too, so the whole square was ringing with voices. I can't help but wonder if it is possible that it was my old choir, the Tri Hi A Cappella, that had assembled in the square that day. I told her about some of our wonderful old inns and auberges. She was charmed by the stories and said she didn't understand how anyone could possibly go to Europe and stay in Holiday Inns, etc. A rich warm satisfying talk. I mentioned how much I liked Utrecht and she said, "Oh goody, my family is originally from Utrecht."

I also heard that Dorothy is manically trying to find another job. If only that would happen and make the world feel right again.

Oct. 6

Seems odd not to be going to Maine on Thanksgiving weekend but we did go to Kingston – to visit Karen and Ken! The four of us went for drinks and dinner at the Pilot House. Ken has started smoking again. I never knew him when he did smoke so I was a little surprised. He was very considerate about it. Even in a bar he was doing his best to keep the smoke away from us. He seemed a little ashamed but to me it also seemed a bit of a pose, part of his intense grad student image. Went for a walk to the harbour to watch the boats bobbing on the water. A tall ship was moored and we were able to climb into the cabin.

**

Lovely day in Picton where we explored the Lake of the Mountains, an area new to all of us. The drive was beautiful, flaming trees. We stopped at a historical site because Ken wanted to read the plaque, and ended up whiling away at least an hour, clambering over rocks, wading, skipping stones, lying on our bellies. We played tag when we reached the Lake of the Mountains. In Picton we had coffee and donuts behind a church, on top of a hill overlooking miles of deep green grass, a small graveyard. Fred, Karen and I taught Ken how to whistle through blades of grass. Ken bought a pack of hockey cards at a little store and stuck them all over the car. Back in Kingston we feasted on Thanksgiving dinner. Tradition is important to Karen and this dinner was complete. We discovered another silly but fun link: Karen and I grew up on mashed potatoes while Ken and Fred always had rice. Karen and I looked at each other and said almost at once, “Rice? Who eats *rice* at Thanksgiving?

After a Roman orgy of food and wine we walked down University Avenue through campus to Lake Ontario. On Thanksgiving weekend the whole campus shuts down. The avenue was deserted, the student houses silent, turned back into the old rundown brick houses they really are. Only signs of past student life remaining in the windows; flags, beer bottle collections, etc. The little grocery stores and laundromats looked especially forlorn. Karen annoyed Ken by telling corny jokes. At the lake we jumped from rock to rock, skipped stones in the dark. Karen took us to the flat rocks, small bushes and gazebo, which she called her Japanese garden.

**

Ken had some research to do and we accompanied him to his office in Watson Hall and then on to Douglas Library. Douglas even smelled the same. Of course I know from Proust (and Trivial Pursuit) that smell is the sense most strongly connected to memory – which makes me wonder about cats. What is Boris really picking up when he gets his sniffer going? I read somewhere that cats' sense of smell is connected with intuition. If only we could train Boris to hunt truffles. He loves to sniff, investigate, rummage and root. I can picture him as a relentless private detective.

I had fun prowling through the Douglas, down to the stacks, the periodicals room where I saw Ken madly photocopying, up to the traditional old chapel reserves room with the muted light filtering through the stained glass window, carrels as austere as wooden pews. Then to the lounge and all the rooms where I wandered and procrastinated from writing term papers. Karen and I checked out the Reference department. She kept wanting to run over and answer the phone. Discovered that Queen's has my book, *Polar Bear*, ensconced in Special Collections. I wonder how they got hold of it. Concordia doesn't even have a copy in its library system. This means McGill, York, UofT, Bibliotheque Nationale du Québec, U of Manitoba, Dawson College and St Francis Xavier and Queen's have the book. I wonder how copies ended up in those places. How does this happen?

Four of us walked through Pervert Park where Ken teased me about how I should be walking along reciting poetry to my devoted disciples. I made up some truly awful lines about our walk. He described in detail the attic room in Kingston I should be inhabiting instead of the tower room over the dépanneur on Tillemont. After coffee at the Second Cup we returned to round two of Thanksgiving dinner and a Sherlock Holmes video. There's a new Sherlock Holmes series on PBS and Ken said, "I hope I'm not ramming this down your throats but we seem to have so much in common, it seems like another thing we can share." I certainly did enjoy it, especially the setting, atmosphere and photography.

Oct. 13

Patty called. She's in Montréal attending a conference. We met around 7:00 pm, after her conference was over and picked up her suitcase and backpack. Dinner at the Commensal with her, David McKnight and Lillian. I enjoy their company. David is so urbane and articulate but he enjoys hockey games, country-western music and "Dallas." Lillian is all cool feistiness. She appears so refined and has such high standards but she's a great good crank with a keen lively wit. I always look forward to seeing them whenever Patty's in town. I often see David at McLennan shlepping around with his MLIS classmates.

The Commensal is a multi-leveled health food buffet place. It's a little like sitting inside an octagon. You can look down and see people moving about on different levels, all the tiny people scuttling, as if magnetized, toward exits. Rooftops at eye level, smoke drifting into the sky, cars slipping in and out of trees on the mountain, yet another level of movement, or being. It's the kind of place where you could sit with a bottle of wine and a newspaper for a long time without anyone noticing you. I expected to see some astrologers there. No one I recognized but an interesting variety of people.

David hates Library Studies and said I was right not the go into the program. He said the group spirit that is artificially induced is insufferably cloying. It was like that at Seneca too. I was really lucky because I was in an older group, with people who had interesting life experiences and I liked so many of them. David says his classmates "take notes like fiends, recording it when the teacher sneezes. You're expected to eat, sleep and go to the bathroom together." He also told me that the promotion of group identity is the real reason why part-time is so discouraged. I told him I had assumed it went part and parcel with McGill's ingrained elitism, old royalty clinging to its vestments of power. We decided it might be a bit of both. I have often wondered over the self-important attitude of so many McGill librarians, especially those in McLennan Reference. Groupthink probably has a lot to do with that.

After a great meal we went to David and Lillian's apartment in NDG, one of those endless rambly NDG apartments I miss so much. David has the best library I have ever seen. He is a collector and I could have spent the entire night there. It reminded me of Shakespeare and Company. The living room belongs to Lillian. It looks like a music room, a place for recitals with a huge black piano looking so polished and definite. Posters of composers and festivals on the walls. Lillian also picks up cats; disreputable looking strays. Four large cats roamed around, looking as if they've been battered some time or another; mashed heads, cauliflower ears, raggedy tails. My favourite was the long tabby with all the jutting ones and the funny little croak, who sat on my lap just like Natasha.

David brought out some Decarie Gold. He, Patty and I indulged while Lillian played us a new age mood piece on the piano. Lillian is quite sardonic when she talks about music therapy, which is what she's doing now. She is also uncomfortable about how it's been co-opted by the New Agers like so many other things; all the therapies, astrology, homeopathy, fitness, etc. She told some stories about music therapy for the terminally ill in the palliative care department in the hospital. On one hand, the music is very important and helps the patients tremendously.

On the other hand, some of the therapists and the dorky questions they asked the patients made Lillian want to puke. "If those therapists ever asked me some of those questions I would be tempted to tell them to fuck off." Patty and I both agreed wholeheartedly. We talked about how there always seems to be this point in any job where you have to keep believing that what you are doing is essentially good and right, and do your best to not succumb to the bullshit aspects or to the people who misuse their credentials. The music Lillian played for us was half-mocking and half deeply felt.

We then had a silly conversation comparing *Twin Peaks* to *Dallas*. We all decided *Dallas* was the more bizarre, its vision of the world just as skewed as *Twin Peaks*. *TP* is actually a much more familiar world to me than *Dallas*. Lillian scorned them both. Great evening of conversation, wine and Decarie Gold.

Oct. 14

Brunch at the Croissant de lune with Patty. We went to Vieux-Montréal and roamed around the waterfront whiling away the time before Patty's train was due to leave. We looked at the ships and the war memorial, a distinctive white tower. We went to the church museum and talked with some of the tiny church ladies at the counter, who were selling statues, crosses, praying hands, mementoes of Marguerite Bourgeoys. Patty bought a couple of refrigerator magnets.

The oddest part of the church museum, which was charmingly eccentric from the get-go, was the room filled with Marguerite Bourgeoys mementoes. The room looked and smelled like (probably because it *was*) a church basement. It was filled with dioramas depicting her Life and Good Works. Little Marguerite dolls, painted backgrounds, which did convey her cloistered world. The austere bedrooms with the cross on the wall, the one dresser and cabinet, the little hand-braided rug on the floor.

Narrow streets, convent walls, attendants surrounding her; all the details circumscribing this life. Fascinating in its own way and I did feel as if I was getting a glimpse of old Québec, the world of the Catholic church. I was looking through a pinhole at an unfamiliar world. For most people here, this is part of their background, something that is there for them even if it something they struggle against or resist. Needless to say it was very colonial and in this place, naturally no questioning or attempt at objectivity.

Miracles were a part of this life and appeared in the little dramas the way any other everyday item was there. Scenes of Marguerite Bourgeoys as missionary, helping the Indians in her little schools. There was the ship from France pitching on the tempest-tossed sea. Also a scene of MB dying, and the heart-broken people following the coffin down the cobblestoned street of the city, all in shades of mourning grey.

We climbed to the top of the church and had a stunning view of the city skyline and we counted church steeples. I love being around someone as observant as Patty and I sometimes wonder if any of the things we see or do together will find their way into a poem.

Oct. 16

Back at McLennan, Technical Services, 6th Floor, Serials department. Way better than closing cataloguing records in a morgue. I certainly enjoy opening mail that comes from all over the world, boxes, parcels, bundles, some covered top to bottom in stamps, some wrapped in paper bags and old newsprint, all somehow making their way across oceans and continents. Some journals seem so fragile with their thin pages and waxy covers, even the most current issues look at least twenty years old. Zafiro Bouwman (Iro) is great to work with. She is conscientious and seems to genuinely enjoy her work. She has two young children, one of whom is in McGill daycare. She doesn't take McGill bureaucracy too seriously. She has a common sense approach to her job and life and expresses herself directly.

We have quite a bit in common. Her husband Patrick has his own computer business. She can always tell when there's a recession by the number of people who call him, asking for jobs. Patrick has heard from neighbours and friends and Iro is convinced this recession will bite deep. Patrick is Dutch and her impressions of the Netherlands were amusing. Like me, she was stunned by the mirrors, and by how they never pull their curtains. She calls them a "country full of snoops." Patrick is as ambivalent about the country as Fred; he has not desire to return.

Ivan is an older, silent man with a Russian accent. He knows five or six languages, including Italian and German, which makes him very useful. I think he likes it when I ask him for help translating words. I would love to know his story. He has had that job in Serials for years, there even before Terry arrived. Terry, the department gossip, told me Ivan is divorced and had just gone through the process when Terry started. Apparently Terry has heard Ivan shouting on the phone, "Don't call me here." But that was years ago. Occasionally Ivan disappears on extended breaks; just seems to vaporize. I sometimes pass him on the stairs and his face lights up in a smile and he always greets me. When he examines the mail on his Spartan clean desk, he looks very eagle-like.

Terry (Terakleitos) Tsiampouras is volatile and touchy. He is charming, insecure and touchy; you never know which side you're going to get. I personally like him and enjoy working (and gossiping) with him, but he is difficult because of his touchiness. He's particularly defensive about eh on-line kardexing. Iro says he is seriously worried about losing his job.

Brenda is tiny, a starveling bird with a hint of ferocity in her face when she laughs. She has a keen dry sense of humour and I know she's intelligent, although she sometimes says the oddest things, which makes me wonder what on earth she reads. She told Iro and me one day that Shakespeare hadn't really existed and his works had been written by the Queen of England. When Iro asked where she had heard that, Brenda became very vague and just said, "Oh I read it somewhere. She reminds me of a Peter Pan character, a doomed child dressed in plain blouses, pressed dress pants, and once even said, "If I wave my arms I would fly like Peter Pan." Her blotter is full of pictures of saintly Victorian children.

Brenda has an obsessive-compulsive disorder. She works from eight to four, and every day at four she goes into a trance where she rocks back and forth from one leg to the other, counting everything on her desk, the books on her truck. Then she goes to the electric typewriter to make sure it is off. She makes sounds that accompany the rocking motion: "Off-off-off" - almost as if she's controlling a dog. Discipline and control. Very unnerving. This ritual is repeated every afternoon; she cannot leave before it is performed. When she is interrupted her face turns deep red and she responds to the interruption or question, then returns to her trance state. When the ritual is finished she says good night to everyone and leaves as if nothing had happened. The head of Serials, Lynne Murphy, has been skulking around, questioning Iro about Brenda, but Brenda does this every day at the same time, after four o'clock and I do not see this as any kind of work issue.

**

Now back at McLennan I can easily pick up videos from ICC. Watched *Closely Watched Trains*. Director: J. Menzel. 1966. The film takes place almost entirely at a remote train station where the teenaged Milo has just taken a job, in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. The film is a black comedy. Milos's premature ejaculation depresses him so much he slashes his wrist and ends up in hospital. This scene is slipped so quickly and abruptly into the film it takes a few moments before the gravity of the situation sinks in, and by the time it does, you're back at the train station again, surrounded by business-as-usual buffoonery and sexual escapades. Milos is finally initiated into the world of sex by an older woman. His violent death comes as a shock, splitting the film like lightning.

This scene comes right at the end, slipped into a scene where the red-herring mother and daughter pair is being interrogated by the Nazi collaborator. The impact stunned me and I just sat stunned as the credits rolled in. The focus of the film, almost exclusively at the train station, gives an isolated outpost quality; the rhythm of their lives tuned to the rhythm of trains pulling in and out. A fragile wintery light, impression of snow, of being snowbound. Yet at the same time, no place, not even an isolated station is safe from the war.

Oct. 26

Interview with Berti LeSieur at Health Sciences Library for permanent acquisitions job. I really liked Berti and enjoyed my interview with her. First of all, she was honest and told me I would be considered only if an internal employee didn't apply for the job. She also said it wasn't necessary to question me about my work experience since I have pretty much done everything, and there wasn't anything in this job I couldn't learn. We spent the interview talking about writing and dreams!

Berti said she used to keep a notebook by her bed where she tried to record her dreams, but nothing she wrote adequately conveyed the atmosphere, or that fluid shifting world where people and things are always changing into other people and things. She said she always wanted to be an artist or writer and can only admire those who are. I get the feeling if she wasn't hindered by the rules about hiring internals, she would have given me the job then and there.

Nov. 1

Fred actually received permission and money from McGill to attend a "Computers in Education" conference in Vermont. We headed there right after work. Unseasonably warm, seemed like late spring, everything seemed to be melting, dissolving, the mountains more than ever like holographs. Everything has lost its structure becoming shows, impressions. My "career" is in shambles. I miss Howard Ross a lot, especially Gail. Cynthia and I both make a lot of jokes about being in exile, consigned to the McLennan diaspora. What's the point of gaining experience, references, accolades if no one can hire you? Underhill Park always looks enchanted. We curled up in the back of the car and I listened to water dripping from the trees.

**

Early day. Fred dropped me off in Burlington before heading out to the conference in Fairlee. Truly relaxing day. I spent long hours in the park, reading, journalling, people-watching. Burlington an intriguing melange of leftover hippies, environmental activists, new-agers, politically-conscious people but also hunters, pick trucks with gunracks, displaced Vietnam veterans and homeless people. I've often been struck by these sides of Vermont and they all seemed to converge in the park today. I even saw the familiar car with all the stickers and slogans drive by three or four times, the driver who looks like a meld between Christ and Charles Manson. Only now the car bears a Vermont license plate instead of California. We have seen this car on every visit to Burlington.

Leunig's, with its European sensibility, was an excellent place to pass time and so, as always, was the library. I found a table and wrote in my journal. A friendly man approached me and asked if I was a writer. I told him I was keeping a journal and sh said he kept one too. He was interested to hear I don't write in it every day, but only when the spirit moves me. I couldn't take the oppression of feeling I had to record something every single day. Interesting how people will feel obligated to do something as personal as a journal. But he was genuinely nice and it was a perfect encounter for a day like this. Visited all my favourite bookstore haunts and I took out a membership to Wit & Wisdom, which gives me a ten per cent discount on books – helpful in light of the looming GST. Met up with Fred again for the traditional dinner at What's Your Beef.

Nov. 3

To Mary Rose's apartment for an evening of film-making and general merriment. Mary Rose was making a video for a film class she is taking with her boyfriend Dominique, who is a film-maker. The video is about a young woman arriving in the big city, introducing her friends and new lifestyle to her parents through this video. Needless to say, the young woman plays the straight role and the rest of us rabbled around in ever-changing personae. Our best lines and most interesting dialogues took place in the kitchen before the filming began.

Suzanne was cast in the role of the sweet young innocent. MR played the part of bitchy room-mate who shouts "fuck off" and slams the door. She is such a perfectionist she taped this scene about five times and spent forty minutes messing up her room. The rest of us were extras. I became Olga, the White Russian countess from the Stolichnaya Dynasty and my favourite refrain was, "But I am r-r-royalty you know." Susan Gouda got into the spirit by becoming a combination Rula Lenska and Greta Garbo, repeating "I vant to be alone," covering her face with a scarf.

The two of us were wild, playing off each other. Right across the street, in a parallel universe, I could see in the windows of the Hasidic shul, an austere classroom with desks, the usual too-bright fluorescents, boys in black suits and earlocks studying Talmud, the Rebbe stopping at each desk. The filming finally ended with Suzanne, transformed as a vampire in long black cape, hissing and baring her fangs.

Nov. 14

Finally broke out of my 6th Floor straitjacket and called Terry Byrnes to see if he would be my thesis advisor. He is available and said he'd be happy to advise me. Soon after that a power failure, which affected all of McGill and a large part of downtown. The McLennan stairs were spooky, straight out of *The Phantom of the Opera* with people in large coats groping their way down. The books in the stacks looked grim and ancient as if they had been sitting there since the 1300s.

Hung out at Circulation talking with Cynthia and Tom from the Systems Office, a hilarious, sarcastic talk. I've always wondered about his impressions of McGill as he has seen it all. Tom has always seemed a little out of place here because he is competent, professional, minds his own business, knows computers and systems. His impressions of the 6th Floor were hilarious and bang on. He talking about the big shopping bags they all carry, the paranoia about the computers, Joanne Hay who yells at you and never wants to do anything, the Binding department that spends all day gossiping and yakking it up about everything under the sun except binding. "Have you ever heard one word about binding?" he said. Tom is completely spooked by Ivan, especially by the way he silently looms, and calls him Lurch.

Tom also mentioned how he feels sorry for anyone from the "public" sent up there, because half a dozen people will turn around and stare at the intruder without speaking. Finally Calvin Evans officially announced McLennan was closed. I imitated his walk, entertaining Cynthia and Tom then said, "This is why I don't have a permanent job here." We left and I discovered the Metro was closed, doors locked, people milling around the entrances. I walked down to the Norris Building, which did have power and stayed there until I saw people enter the Metro station.

New Year's Eve

At the Grad House with Karen, Ken, Marsha and John. Joanne Holland was there and we talked for the first time in years. We first met in frosh week and she remembered how we both stood on the sidelines baffled by the dead horses and elephant walks. She actually still remembers my notes and said she would never have got through Sociology without them. She looked so much the same, the lines on her forehead a little deeper but the same honest, sincere sympathetic face. It was hard for us to believe so much time has passed. I talked some with her boyfriend. He is going to Prague to teach ESL.

Marsha took us to find her favourite student volunteer. She led us into a shady smoke-filled David Lynchian room with a snowy TV screen and David Letterman blabbing at four or five very drunk/stoned people. Marsha may have known a couple sitting on the couch. At any rate she launched into one of her surreal monologues by declaring that she felt rich because she always had enough money in her pocket to buy an egg roll. I just said I was a failure and a casualty of the high-rolling 80s. The woman was interesting and we hit it off. The man was disturbing, though. His talk was aggressive and disjointed. I was relieved when Ken, who knows his way around grad houses, rescued us.

Midnight rolled around. Horns, cheers, whistles, "Auld Lang Syne." Marsha found John and she cried on his shoulder, releasing some of the pain of 1990. John looked emotional as well. Marsha kissed us and it really meant something and I was overwhelmed at seeing the new year in with this friend who has come to mean so much to me. We linked arms, swayed and sang "Auld Lang Syne."

After the grad party we went to the K&K's friends' house. Karen has met a friend, Connie, through her work which makes her feel a lot better about living in Kingston. I sometimes wonder what will happen to Karen and Ken's relationship in the future. He is so ambitious and he was hanging on to Al the history prof's every word. Al teaches history in BC and his wife travels all over Canada and the US. They keep an apartment in the old Elrond complex where they meet during occasional times they're in the same province. I was fascinated by their relationship, especially that for once, it's the woman doing the travelling, loving the freedom, determining when and where they meet.

Marsha and John eventually arrived. John was animated and talkative. Marsha regaled us with stories of how and why she was detained at the Grad House. This story led to a whole chain of stories and Marsha was on a roll, revelling in her role of raconteur. Everyone roared with laughter and I was fascinated as stories I had heard many times before were revised, re-dramatized, the comic parts heightened. Her stories, her presence, are an art form.

There was an unsettling undercurrent though, similar to the feeling I had up in that Lynchian chamber. Marsha's audience seemed unaware that this was a persona, pure performance art. At first I enjoyed the forehead slapping, the mock-baffled responses, the "oh no, the plot thickens" and "wait a minute, who was so and so again comments. The audience was performing too, reacting exactly as they were supposed to. What unsettled me was some of the men's, especially Al's, responses to the woman's adventures. Here is a well-educated man, a professor, someone who carries on an unconventional long-distance relationship making comments like, "Well, what did you expect going into a place like that?" Or "You let the guy buy you drinks?" I found this depressing. After a while it seemed as if the mockery had turned derisive and Marsha seemed to be parodying herself. Fred and I left at four a.m and John started prodding Marsha.

It was lovely just walking a few blocks back to Karen and Ken's, lovely being able to walk everywhere tonight, no transportation worries. A light snow dusted the rooftops and trees, street revellers greeted us, "Happy New Year." The shadows dispersed and it felt good again to be part of it all.